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→ Immersions and Dives: From
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Edited by Roberto P. Malaspina,
Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello

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Introduction Vol. 2, no. 1 (2023)

The present volume *Immersion and Dives: From the Environment to Virtual Reality* of the journal *AN-ICON: Studies in Environmental Images* is divided into two issues, each one dedicated to a specific thematic analysis, originated by the same conceptual core. The volume reflects on the concept of immersivity, which has become increasingly prominent in many different fields, including contemporary art. The constant reference to immersive experience is redefining the boundaries of artistic practice

Keywords

[Immersion](#)

[Dives](#)

[Installation](#)

[Virtual reality](#)

[Augmented reality](#)

¹ This essay is the result of research activity developed within the frame of the project *AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images*. AN-ICON has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. [834033 AN-ICON]) and is hosted by the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti" of the University of Milan in the frame of the project "Dipartimenti di Eccellenza 2023-2027" sponsored by Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca (MUR). The authors Roberto P. Malaspina, Elisabetta Modena, and Sofia Pirandello equally contributed to this paper.

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and fruition, highlighting the complex relationships between art, environments, and human perception.

The first issue of the volume, *Immersions*, discusses the recent “immersive trend” as applied to artistic perceptual dynamics and to display design. Through a perspective that combines both history and theory of art, *Immersions* provides a broad and heterogeneous mapping of the many uses of this concept, exploring it in different historical contexts and through various methodologies of analysis.

The second issue, *Dives*, will shift the conceptual focus to action. Diving, understood as a preparatory and essential movement of immersion, becomes a metaphor for investigating in particular those performative artistic practices that have engaged in various bodily forms with immersive environments. *Dives* also includes a non-peer-reviewed section devoted to contributions by artists and independent researchers who present their strategy to dive into immersive spaces and environments, in order to physically explore them.

Immersions

In recent years we have witnessed a growing fashion for every experience to be “immersive.” At least this is what the rhetoric of communication and marketing suggests, promising immersions of various kinds, but with a common denominator that goes beyond a general idea of attention as absorption:² the feeling of being physically enveloped and interactively engaged in a multisensory environment.³ Hence, we speak of immersive environments,

2 W. Wolf, W. Bernhardt, A. Mahler, eds., *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2013).

3 A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); F. Liptay, B. Dogramaci, eds., *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media* (Leiden-Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016).

immersive cinema and video, immersive exhibitions and installations, and so on. The term “immersion” has only been used with some regularity since the 1990s in relation to technologies such as Virtual Reality, which was then being experimented for the first time outside the laboratories where it was developed in the late 1960s.⁴ However, some researchers have attempted to reconstruct a possible genealogy of immersive environments much earlier. Like a subterranean river, the immersive aesthetic experience would resurface in different periods, beginning with Paleolithic cave paintings, through Pompeian painting and *trompe-l’œil*, and then from Baroque illusionistic ceiling paintings to multimedia installations.⁵ A decisive moment for the design of these environments has been traced back to the 19th century, in particular the obsession for *ὄραμα* (from the ancient Greek “view”), which saw the spread of devices such as the panorama, the diorama, the cosmorama, etc.,⁶ responsible for the construction of an “emotional geography.”⁷ However, one of the most significant moments in this history, which has not yet been sufficiently explored in this debate,⁸ is that of the installations and environments that appeared in the first decades of the 20th century in the works of the avant-garde artists of the time. In 1976, invited by Vittorio Gregotti, Germano Celant curated the exhibition *Ambiente/Arte: Dal Futurismo alla Body Art*, held at the Central Pavilion in the Giardini for the 37th Venice Biennale. In this occasion, the history of environments was

4 I. Sutherland, “The Ultimate Display,” *Proceedings of the IFIP Congress 65. Washington 1* (1965): 506-508; I. Sutherland, “A Head-Mounted Three-Dimensional Display,” *AFIPS Fall Joint Computer Conference Proceeding 33* (Washington: Thompson Books, 1968): 757-64.

5 J. Nechvatal, *Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances: A Study of the Affinity between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009).

6 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge-London: The MIT Press, 2003); S. Bordini, *Storia del panorama* (Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2006).

7 G. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2000).

8 E. Modena, “Immersi nell’irreale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull’arte contemporanea dall’ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte semiotiche. Rivista internazionale di semiotica e teoria dell’immagine* 7 (2021): 71-78.

reconstructed from the beginning of the 20th century, when avant-garde artists began to create “wall boxes on a human scale.”⁹ These environments allowed the visitor to physically enter the work, going beyond the frame.¹⁰ Since then, artists have increasingly experimented with installations¹¹ and works that aim to produce enveloping, participatory and interactive physical experiences,¹² also making use of new technologies such as Virtual, Augmented and Mixed Reality. The exhibition itself, as an immersive device, has played a significant role throughout the 20th venues, from the Venice Biennale to the Kassel documenta, is increasingly blurring the boundaries between artwork and exhibition.¹³ The physical presence of the visitor in the multisensory space of the artwork,¹⁴ as well as their role as activator and experiencer, is central to any discussion of immersive contemporary art.

Indeed, immersive installations bring to different forms of narration and storytelling,¹⁵ presenting themselves both as an exclusive space (separated from the rest of the world) and an inclusive context (as they literally absorb the visitor). Within the environment (analogue, digital, or mixed),

9 G. Celant, ed., *Ambiente/Arte: Dal Futurismo alla Body Art: Biennale Arte 1976* (Venezia: La Biennale): p. 6.

10 G. Celant, “La cornice: dal simbolismo alla land art,” in G. Celant, ed., *Il limite svelato: Artista, cornice, pubblico* (Milano: Electa, 1981); D. Ferrari, A. Pinotti, eds., *La cornice: Storie, teorie, testi* (Milano: Johan & Levi, 2018); P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2020).

11 C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

12 I. Kabakov, M. Tupitsyn, V. Tupitsyn, “About Installation,” *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1999): 62-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1999.10791966>; J. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005); B. Groys, “Politics of Installation,” *E-flux journal reader* 2009 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009); S. Zuliani, *Senza cornice: Spazi e tempi dell’installazione* (Roma: Arshake, 2015).

13 E. Filipovic, M., van Hal, S. Ovstebo, eds., *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010).

14 C. Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*; A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine*; F. Liptay, B. Dogramaci, eds., *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media*.

15 M. Bal, “Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999): 103-126. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/22.2.101>; M. Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001); Allen, N., Combrink, L., “Character (and absence) as a narrative key in installation art,” *Literator* 40, no. 1 (2019): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v40i1.1449>.

at times artists leave clues or hints of stories; at other times, they build real scripts linked to real or plausible events or based on fictional characters – think of the growing role of science fiction in building utopian or dystopian narratives.¹⁶

Nowadays also the debate on how best to preserve and respect the authenticity of complex installations is compelling, considering the need to respect their time and site specificity.¹⁷

As a matter of fact, the latest generation of immersive technologies, together with the most recent theories of the environmentalisation of the image,¹⁸ suggest that we reconsider Boris Groys's assertion about the possibility of interpreting installation as image and image as installation,¹⁹ thus confronting art history and theory with visual studies.

In this respect, this first volume brings together different strategies and fields of analysis that have reasoned about the processes involved. In her essay, Mieke Bal places a strong emphasis on exhibition practices as key for understanding the contemporary realm. Bal calls for the recognition of the interplay between past and present, advocating for visitor engagement that solicits affective empathic attitudes. Through her video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, she stresses the transformative potential of art-making as a tool for cultural analysis.

Giuliana Bruno challenges the established notion of immersion itself by introducing the concept of “environmental projection.” Bruno invites us to reconsider the ecological dimensions of representation, particularly in terms

16 D. Byrne-Smith, ed., *Documents of Contemporary Art: Science Fiction* (London: White Chapel Gallery, 2020).

17 B. Ferriani, M. Pugliese, *Monumenti effimeri: Storia e conservazione delle installazioni* (Milano: Electa, 2009).

18 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

19 B. Groys, “Multiple Authorship” in B. Vanderlinden, E. Filipovic, eds. *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); E. Modena, “Immersi nell'irreale: Prospettive an-iconiche sull'arte contemporanea dall'ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte semiotiche. Rivista internazionale di semiotica e teoria dell'immagine* 7 (2021): 71-78.

of movement and scale. She questions the relationship between immersion and magnification, ultimately proposing the notion of “empathic projection” as a means to transcend human-centric perspectives in immersive experiences.

Lucia Corrain’s text delves into the immersive qualities of art, particularly in the Chamber of the Giants by Giulio Romano in Mantua (Italy). Corrain explores the phenomenological and ontological aspects of immersion in art, emphasizing the viewer’s sense of awe and estrangement.

Filippo Fimiani analyzes allegories of immersion through the lens of the *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* series, considering in particular the episode *Fish Night*. He examines the cultural topos of immersive experience, highlighting the ambivalent relationship between living bodies, images, and media in deep time-bending scenarios.

Roberto Pinto shifts the focus to the intersection of art and history through Jeremy Deller’s immersive performance *We Are Here Because We Are Here*. Deller’s work exemplifies a change in commemorating historical events, focusing on individual stories and emotions rather than traditional heroic narratives. The artwork engages the audience on a personal level, prompting reflection and emotional connection, ultimately redefining the role of public art in collective memory.

Francesco Tedeschi’s paper takes the reader on a journey through Italian environmental art, examining the transformation of space by artists such as Lucio Fontana, Gruppo T, and others in the 1950s and 1960s. Tedeschi’s investigation focuses on the evolving link between interior and exterior spaces, the concept of passage, and the reasons which invite viewers to traverse rather than merely inhabit spaces.

Annette Urban explores the blurred boundaries between art objects, space, and beholders in VR art and exhibitions. She discusses how VR art challenges traditional subject-object relationships and often embeds itself

into physical exhibition spaces, resulting in potentiated environmentalisation.

Stefano Velotti's suggestion to revert the usual perspective on the concept of "immersivity," consists in introducing the idea of "an-immersivity," namely the ontological condition of individuals who are immersed in reality but aware of it. In order to do so, he discusses the limits and characteristics of immersive VR experiences, the role of art, and the tension between control and uncontrollability in immersive encounters.

Lastly, Giorgio Zanchetti examines the persistence of the locution "looking glass," – that primarily comes from Lewis Carroll's novel – which highlights the duality of a glass surface as a means of viewing the world and as an object to be observed. Italian artists of the 20th century, such as Lucio Fontana and Luciano Fabro, frequently explored three attitudes: looking through the glass, observing the reflected image in a mirror, and examining the glass itself as a tool for presenting and representing spaces.

The editors of the volume and the AN-ICON project would like to thank Pirelli HangarBicocca, Giovanna Amadasi, and Roberta Tenconi for their essential contribution to the organisation of the conference "Immersed in the Work. From Environment to Virtual Reality" (Milan, June 13th -16th 2022), a seminal occasion of reflection for the development of this thematic double issue.

Con-Temporary: Thinking and Feeling Together



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<https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19939>

Abstract

The paper focuses on exhibition practice, taking exhibitions as the key to contemporaneity. I will make a strong plea for the mutuality between past and present, the encouragement of visitors becoming participants through soliciting affective empathic attitude, and the accommodation to make this possible thanks to the enticement of durational looking. I will do this through the theoretical analysis of what exhibiting means and does, and through a consideration of my recent video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*. One episode of this project will be the hook on which to hang my view of art-making as, not an illustration of but a method of cultural analysis.

Keywords

[Exhibition](#)

[Video essay](#)

[Don Quijote](#)

[Political art](#)

[Artistic process](#)

To quote this essay: M. Bal, “Con-Temporary: Thinking and Feeling Together,” *AN-ICON. Studies in Environmental Images* [ISSN 2785-7433] 2, no. 1 (2023): 11-28, <https://doi.org/10.54103/ai/19939>.

In this article I am particularly keen to explore the implications of the preposition “con-” as a guideline for immersive art. With the qualifier “immersive” I aim to suggest that art can offer insights into the *process* of art, rather than the aesthetic, intellectual qualities, objecthood, or history of particular artworks. The process is what involves people, social issues and contexts, and what is “live” – dynamic, unstopably moving, and never stable – about art. Art is not a “thing;” we, as its viewers or users, are inside it. In particular, I would like to argue how making audio-visual installations can be a terrific resource for the integration of “academic” reflection and scholarship with art processing through immersion. The *making* aspect enables me to reflect on and create situations where the relationship with visual art can become a social route while remaining artistically relevant. For this to happen, *contemporaneity* is key: immersion can only happen in the present.

The integration of approaches I have termed “cultural analysis:” the detailed analysis of cultural objects or artefacts, not in isolation but in their live, social and political context, as artistic and aesthetic, intertwined with intellectual reflection. The two approaches of detailed, close analysis and framing in context are not in contradiction: this is my starting point. More than 25 years ago I have co-founded an institute at the University of Amsterdam, called ASCA: Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. Its goal was and is to promote an approach wherein the socio-political and the contemporary are not in contradiction, only in a productive tension with detailed analysis and lessons in looking; nor is the contemporariness in tension with history. When, in 2002, by chance I found myself in a situation where I had to make a film as a witness statement, witnessing the police injustice against immigration, I bought a small video camera and started filming. It concerned the life of my neighbour – an immigrant “*sans papiers.*” Meeting him in the courtyard,

by chance, seeing his arm was in a cast, I asked him what happened, invited him in, and our conversation about his situation led to an enduring friendship – given the need for mutual trust, this is the a priori condition of making a documentary. With a small group of friends, under the heading of Cinema Suitcase we made a documentary, *A Thousand And One Days*, obviously alluding to the Arabic classic, and inspired by the name of the collective, a number of documentaries and performance films followed, focusing on “migrimages,” to borrow a term from a research project at the University of Granada indicating visual presentations of situations of migration.¹

This was the moment I discovered how deeply *making* an artwork helps intellectual thinking. But also, how intellectual thinking is never alone. In the book that has appeared in 2022, titled *Image-Thinking: Art Making as Cultural Analysis* I explain in detail how making the films I have since then made, have helped me immensely to deepen my thinking. That is what I have termed “image-thinking,” in an attempt to come up with a term for integration of the different activities of which my work consists. Of course, in a short article I can only briefly touch upon the important questions this endeavour brings up. To make it work, I would like to count on you having seen, or going to see, the episode 6, of 8 minutes, of my installation from 2019, *Don Quijote: Tristes figuras*, based on fragments from (mostly) the first part of the novel by Cervantes (from 1605). Hard as that decision was, I declined to make a feature film, as I had done with my other projects based on the cultural heritage of fiction. This seemed unacceptable, because

¹ For more information about the resulting documentary: [https://www.miekebal.org/films/mille-et-un-jours-\(1001-days\)](https://www.miekebal.org/films/mille-et-un-jours-(1001-days)), accessed July 15, 2023, and M. Bal, “A Thousand and One Voices,” in M. Anders Baggesgaard, J. Ladegaard, eds., *Confronting Universalities: Aesthetics and Politics under the Sign of Globalisation* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011): 269-304. The third chapter of my book *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022): 90-130 is devoted to the question of “who speaks?” in documentaries, with this film as the example. The term “migrimages” was invented by literary theorist Domingo Sánchez-Mesa Martínez.

turning that novel into a linear, coherent narrative film would be a betrayal of the most crucial aspect of the novel: its non-linearity, even incoherence. Instead, an immersive installation, as you can see in the documentation, where we showed its installations done immediately after finishing the project.²

Take the scene *Narrative Stuttering*, which I hope you have watched or will do so. This scene shows Don Quijote alone on a dark theatrical stage. Sancho Panza is sitting on a chair on the side, helping him when needed, as a prompter. The knight is desperately trying to tell his story, the adventures, his opinions, whatever happened to him, but he is unable to act effectively as a narrator. At the end, he bursts into tears and Sancho holds him in order to comfort him, demonstrating, by physical touch, that he is not entirely alone. See the photograph on the web page, second column. The appeal to empathy is a key aspect of what we tried to achieve with this installation. Sancho is giving the example; the visitors can follow his lead (imaginatively).

The darkness of the stage deprives the space of perspectival depth. The dark stage isolates him and, at the same time, gives him an audience. The theatrical setting is a material “theoretical fiction” that explores how theatricality can perhaps help to enable the narratively disabled. My commitment to addressing the issue of narrative

2 See <https://www.miekebal.org/film-projects-1>, accessed July 16, 2023. <http://miekebal.withtank.com/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/episode-6-narrative-stuttering>. For a book on the installation, see M. Bal, *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (Växjö: Trolltrumma, 2019), also in bilingual English-Spanish edition as *Don Quijote: Tristes figuras / Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* (Murcia: Cendeac, 2020). The installation has been exhibited at a World première in Småland Museum / Kulturparken, Växjö, Sweden (October 31, 2019), then at Usina Cultural, Villa María, Argentina, VIII Congreso (April 26 to May 6, 2022), the Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK), as part of the congress of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik (German Society for Aesthetics) *Ästhetik und Erkenntnis* (July 13-15, 2021). Installed in the Aktionsraum of Toni-Areal (July 13-21, 2021), in the exhibition *Art out of Necessity, video installations by Mieke Bal* at the Museum Jan Cunen, Oss, Netherlands (October 3, 2020 - January 31, 2021), interrupted mid-December by the second corona lockdown); in the Leeds Arts University Gallery a.k.a. The Blenheim Walk (January 7 - February 14, 2020). Curator: Catriona McAra, and in the Sala de exposiciones, Universidad de Murcia, Facultad de Bellas Artes (November 14, 2019 - January 18, 2020), curated by Jesús Segura.

disablement through trauma has been nourished especially when I made, with British artist Michelle Williams Gamaker, and with the participation of psychoanalyst of trauma Françoise Davoine, the theoretical fiction film *A Long History of Madness* (2011) and installations derived from it. This film is “about” madness, but it also stages, performs, enacts, and critiques ideas about madness and their cultural history. Based on the 1998 book *Mère Folle* by Davoine, the film stages the question and practice of the psychoanalytic treatment of people diagnosed as “psychotic” and whom, to avoid narrowing diagnostic discourse, we call “mad.”³

The film raises the art-historical question whether we can say there is an “iconography of madness.” Most of the actors *play* “madness.” None of them *are* mad. Davoine’s book, written as a fiction, theorizes this question. In that sense it is a “theoretical fiction.” That term comes from Sigmund Freud. He came up with it to defend his quite crazy story of the sons who kill and eat their tyrannical father. Freud made up a fiction, not simply to *explain* his theoretical finding of the Oedipus complex, but primarily to *develop* it through immersion in fiction, which he needed to understand and articulate what he had been intuitively groping toward. This is thinking *in, through* and *with* fictional characters and events. My book title “Image-Thinking” was derived from Freud’s concept.

When, later, I showed my film *Reasonable Doubt*, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, to an artist friend, she complimented me on the “theatrical” quality of the film. Then I understood why theatricality had, in fact, always been an important aspect of my fiction films. The theatricality helps to do what I have called “exhibiting

3 On this issue of madness as a consequence of trauma, the book by Françoise Davoine *Mère folle: Récit* (Paris: Hypothèses Arcanes, 1998) is crucial. Our film *A Long History of Madness* came out in 2011 (directed by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker). For more information: <https://www.miekebal.org/films/a-long-history-of-madness>, accessed July 16, 2023. See also the special issue on the book and the film: E. Landa, ed., “Cinéma et psychanalyse,” *Le Coq-héron* 4, no. 211 (2012).

ideas.” In the video project based on *Don Quijote*, this theatricality is even more prominent, not only in the acting, but in the exhibition itself. The exhibition as installed is, then, itself a “theoretical fiction.”

Theatre scholar Kati Röttger considers theatricality

a specific mode of perception, a central figure of representation, and an analytic model of crises of representation that can be traced back to changes in the material basis of linguistic behaviour, cultures of perception, and modes of thinking.⁴

The multi-tentacled description gives theatricality many functions, and foregrounds its inherent intermediality. In addition, and more specifically for our project, theatre and performance scholar Maaïke Bleeker gives theatricality the critical edge that the exhibition seeks to achieve when she calls it “a critical vision machine.”⁵ These two definitions together already show that theatricality can offer a critical perspective on the images and ideas that circulate, in this case, in the exhibition that is as mad as the main figure of Cervantes’s novel is generally assumed to be. A madness in which the visitor is *immersed*.

For this need of the narratively incapacitated figure an empathic audience is indispensable. It is the task of the artwork to solicit such an audience. This requires a form of display that changes the traditional museal display, which keeps audience members at a distance and is quite hard on the audience’s physical condition. But it is primarily an artistic issue. This governs the temporality of looking. In the theatre, in contrast to traditional display, visitors can sit, relax, and concentrate. If the display is nearby and

4 K. Röttger, “The Mystery of the In-Between: A Methodological Approach to Intermedial Performance Analysis,” *Forum Modernes Theater* 28, no. 2 (2018): 105-16, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fmt.2013.0014>.

5 M. Bleeker, “Being Angela Merkel,” in E. van Alphen, M. Bal C. Smith, eds. *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009): 247-62. See also Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

accessible, and visiting can consist of quietly sitting, the museum can become such a theatre. You see people sitting down, and as a result, talking together about the painting that is in front of them, low-hung, on eye-level. The Don Quijote exhibition seeks to produce such material comfort, and thus will facilitate affective engagement in visitors. The consequence is a radically different temporality of viewing. *And time, thus, turns out to be a condition of an immersion that effectively affects.* If affect is a vibrant communication between people, or between people and artwork, then they must be given the time, the physical comfort this requires. This imagining, testing, and reasoning regarding the affective effectivity of museum display shows how this project pertains to what is currently called “artistic research” – a search through analysis through artmaking.⁶

That concept is deeply problematic. It maintains the hierarchy between academic and artistic research, suggesting that artists can earn academic diplomas if they can explain and articulate how their works came to be. The risk is an over-intellectualizing of art. The linearity built into the concept is deceptive; this is not how art-making happens. As Kamini Vellodi warns us in her Deleuzian critique of the concept of “artistic research:” “it is difficult to deny that a major impetus of artistic research has been *economic, policy-driven, and managerial.*”⁷ With these words she invokes the curse that is destroying universities word-wide as we speak. Both art and thought are thus being damaged. When thinking is subjected to methods, it becomes

6 I have strongly argued for the relevance of seating in exhibitions in a show I curated at the Munch Museum (Oslo) in 2017 (with a book publication).

7 K. Vellodi, “Thought Beyond Research: A Deleuzian Critique of Artistic Research,” in P. de Assis, P. Giudici, eds., *Aberrant Nuptials: Deleuze and Artistic Research 2* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019): 215-33, 216.

re-productive. In a Deleuzian view, thought, instead, ought to be the production of the *new*.

This thinking is congenial to art-making, but just as much to academic work. The integration of these two creative activities is explained in my book *Thinking in Film* from 2013, on the video art by Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila. But the search is not for direct academic answers. The concept of “image-thinking,” in the form of a verb, renders the interaction between thinking and imaging more forceful. To foreground this, we titled an exhibition of my video work in 2019 in Murcia, Spain, *Contaminations: Reading, Imagining, Imaging*. The noun “contaminations” suggests that the art is inevitably in process and “contagious,” having an affective impact, as I said above. The verb “imagining” was my attempt to foreground the way the imagination creates images. The collaboration with Hernández made these issues clearer and the neologisms more productive.⁸

The fourfold challenge to make a video project based on *Don Quijote* engage its troubled relationship between content and form, and between the narrative and visual aspects involved. The research part was, firstly, to decide which aspects of the novel are crucial to make a video work that has a point. Secondly, that point had to connect artistic and social issues, and to improve our understanding of how these two domains can go together, in the contemporary, with the collaboration of the past in what we call “cultural heritage” – here, Cervantes’ novel. The importance of the past for the present, and vice versa, how our present changes the past as we can see it, must be foregrounded on the basis of non-chronological, mutual relations. The fourth chapter of my new book, *Multi-Tentacled Time: Contemporaneity, Heterochrony, Anachronism for Pre-posterous History* analyses time in its multiplicity.

⁸ That exhibition was curated by Miguel Ángel Hernández. A collective volume, edited by Hernández, was published in 2020.

This is also a central concern both in narrative theory and in film.⁹

In my academic work I have a controversial reputation as someone who does not take chronology for granted. After publishing *Reading "Rembrandt"* (1991) I was blamed for being ahistorical, which, although not true, was a stimulating incentive to think harder about historical time. That led to my book *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999), in which I addressed that critique, and developed a new sense of history in relation to time. But it was when, already filmmaking, I was working with Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro on a large collective video exhibition devoted to the connections between the movement of images and the movement of people, in other words, video *and* migration (not *on* migration), that my thinking about temporality took another turn. 2MOVE (the exhibition), was shown in four countries, with in each a local artist added.

The last concept in the chapter's title, "pre-posterous history," is presented again through my latest, 2020 short "essay film" *It's About Time!* This film, the title of which is as ambiguous as the concept of "pre-posterous history" with its self-ironic wink, addresses the world's self-destructive impulse. It does this through the voice of Christa Wolf's character Cassandra. She was the prophetess from antiquity, who will see and know the future, as a gift with the purpose of seduction from the god Apollo. But when she refused to sleep with her employer, he punished her: she was doomed never be believed. An antique case of #MeToo.

In that fourth chapter I discuss the different issues of time that, in narrative theory, are usually divided into order, rhythm, and duration. I complicate that tripartite

9 M. Bal, *Image-Thinking*: 131-74. I have first developed this neologism, "pre-posterous history," in my book on Caravaggio in its mutual relationship with contemporary art *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999). "Multi-tentacled" stands for the plurality of temporal relationships, for which I chose the octopus as a symbol.

theory by adding the experiential aspect (heterochrony) and the categories of the historical disciplines. This rethinking of chronology has an important impact on how we see ourselves in history. For the first time I have taken a biographical fact on the novel's author on board. This "fact" is the five-and-a-half years Cervantes spent as a slave in Algiers, without knowing he would ever get out. If we take this on, all the adventures, the madness, the violence that colour the adventures of the Knight Errant, get a different shade. On my reading, the issue that rules the novel's aesthetic is the difficulty of story-telling due to the horror encountered. This is now called "post-traumatic stress disorder" – except that, as usual, the preposition "post-" perverts the connections between past and present. The traumatized subject is "disordered" because, precisely, the trauma doesn't go away.

There is nothing "post-" possible for the traumatized. The insights the novel generates connect to other experiences of war, violence, and captivity: contemporary ones. You can see succinctly what the consequences of traumatization tend to be, according to a very lucid article by Ernst van Alphen. The author analyses the experiential handicaps resulting from trauma as well as the narrative ones. To sum it up succinctly: as a failed experience, trauma leads to semiotic incapacitation, unavailable forms of representation, the stalling of the discursive process, which would be needed for having experiences. Specifically, in narrative terms, ambiguous actantial position, the negation of subjectivity, the lack of meaning-giving plot, and unacceptable frames. But a well-thought-through immersive video project can explore and transgress the limits of what

can be seen, shown, narrated, and empathically witnessed, in relation to notoriously un-representable trauma.¹⁰

Full of incongruous events and repetitive stories, maddening implausibility, lengthy interruptions of the story-line, inserted poems and novellas, and at the same time, anchored in a harrowing reality, while also making readers laugh out loud, this novel, in form and content, challenges reading itself. This requires interdisciplinarity, in all meanings of that preposition “inter-.” I have termed it “intership.” The similarity to the word “internship” suggests that this, too, concerns learning, as a practice of mutuality.

Film seems the least apt to do justice to the novel’s turbulent incoherence, repetitiveness, and incongruous adventures told in the novel. Talking about it with actor Mathieu Montanier, who came up with the idea of making a Don Quijote video work, we decided that an immersive video installation consisting of different, non-linear episodes *presented with seating* would be more effective in showing, rather than representing, not the moment trauma occurs but enduring violence-generated traumatic *states*. The importance of showing is to enable *witnessing* as an engaged activity against the indifference of the world, our worst opponent. The ambition was to make a work the theatricality of which in immersive display helps to turn onlookers and voyeurs into *activated*, empathic *witnesses*.

This artwork must yield “thought-images” or *Denkbilder*, created by means of “image-thinking.” The small iconic texts that Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer wrote, were texts only. What did the word *Bilder* do there, then? This is where “image-thinking” can meet, and yield, “thought-images.” In a study of the genre, US-based scholar of German

10 E. v. Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, Trauma,” in M Bal, J. Crewe, L. Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover NH: University of New England Press, 1999): 24-38.

Gerhard Richter begins his description with a whole range of negativities.

Indeed, a programmatic treatise would be something like a political pamphlet, as opposed to historical objectivations – an opposition that audio-visual art is devoted to questioning. This is an important point in connection to attempts to separate political art or scholarship from propaganda. The difference is important: propaganda *dictates*, as in dictators, which is close to imposing; whereas political art and scholarship expose and propose, but leave the freedom of the addressees intact; as long as they are immersed, so that they are enticed to respond to the art they see. What Richter disparagingly calls “*fanciful fiction*” stands opposed to an equally dismissed “*mere reflections of reality*.” “Rather,” Richter continues, “the miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production.”¹¹ The word “engagement” is crucial; it requires contemporaneity. This matches Benjamin’s fifth thesis on images of the past, which has been a guideline for my work on art between history and anachronism: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably.”¹² This warning is one of the main motors of immersive projects and needs endorsement of their contemporariness. For, the cultural heritage from the

11 G. Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections on Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 2.

12 W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: The Bodley Head, 2015): 245-55, 247.

past matters for today's world. But only if we manage to bring it to bear on the present.¹³

Richter further describes the thought-image thus: "The Denkbild encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant meditations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic."¹⁴ The word "flashes up" suggests the quick flash that Benjamin urges us to preserve by means of recognition in the first sentences of that thesis V from which I now quote a later sentence: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."¹⁵ This also connects to the question of historical truth, at stake in the scene "Who is Don Quijote?"¹⁶

In this regard, in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes:

What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling — that is to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire.¹⁷

As in Benjamin's thesis, as well as Lyotard's figurality, the language here is again both visual and shock-oriented, with "sparks," "short-circuiting," "sudden light" and "sets it on fire." This is *thought alive*, living thought, here-now,

13 On this necessary contemporaneity I have published the short book *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness* in the series *The Contemporary Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), requested by the author of a fabulous later book on contemporariness: J. Lund, *The Changing Constitution of the Present: Essays on the Work of Art in the Time of Contemporaneity* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022). My point was the idea that exhibitions are the most precise "model" for the contemporary.

14 G. Richter, *Thought-Images*: 2.

15 W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History:" 247.

16 See for this scene, <http://miekebal.withtank.com/artworks/installations/don-quijote-sad-countenances/episode-4-who-is-don-quijote/>. This scene also suggests that the actor, Mathieu Montanier, bears a striking resemblance to the (totally imaginative and imaged) figure who never existed historically, but of whom we have a clear image.

17 T. W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form" (1954-58), in *Notes to Literature*, trans. S. Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): vol.1, 3-23.

and this living thought has *agency*; it is capable of engaging viewers in a dialogic relationship. And it is visual. For such sparks to happen, thought needs a formal innovation that shocks, and time to make immersion in it, possible. Thus, it can gain new energy and life, involve people, and make thought a collective process rather than the kind of still images we call *clichés*. Our attempt to achieve such “sparking,” shocking innovation can be glimpsed in this photograph by Ebba Sund: the frame is both blurred, since the escaping slave leaves it behind, and foregrounded, in the large proportions the iron bars have compared to the fleeing man (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Mieke Bal, *The Captive escapes*, photograph by Ebba Sund. An episode of the 16-screen installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video, color, Dolby sound, 8 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

In the videos, such sparks lay in the combination of material, practical changes of the mode of display as immersive, short-circuiting the anachronistic bond between present and past, the confusion of languages and other categories we tend to take for granted as homogeneous, and the intermediality of the audio-visualization of a literary masterpiece. In view of the need for witnessing, such a messy “thinking” form enables and activates viewers to construct their own story, and connect it to what they have seen around them; on the condition that they

are immersed through being given time. Thus, we aimed to turn the hysteria of endless story-telling into a reflection on *communication*, as it can breach, and reach beyond, the boundaries that madness draws around its captive subjects, and instead, open up their subjectivity. Here, in the brilliant photograph also by Ebba Sund, the Captive cannot speak; his mouth is visually muzzled. But his eyes do speak, to us – if we are given the time, through seating, to respond (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Mieke Bal, episode 6 of the 16-screen installation *Don Quixote: Sad Countenances*, 2019, video, color, Dolby sound, 8 minutes. Courtesy the artist.

To give insight into the stagnation that characterises the adventures, these scenes are predominantly *descriptive*. Any attempt at narrative is “stuttering,” without development. The scene *Narrative Stuttering I* recommended you watch before reading this essay, shows both the incapacitation to narrate and the frustration this causes. The theatrical setting is meant to draw visitors’ attention to the way they are themselves situated: inside a theatre, sitting on the stage, rather than in front of it, where they can fall asleep or get excited, identify or not, and possibly remain indifferent. Here, such indifference is hard to sustain, because the viewers’ freedom to determine themselves how long they wish to stay with a scene makes falling asleep contradictory.

This is the tentative design of the installation I made beforehand, suggesting the total arbitrariness of the lay-out. The different installations follow this design roughly (Fig. 3).

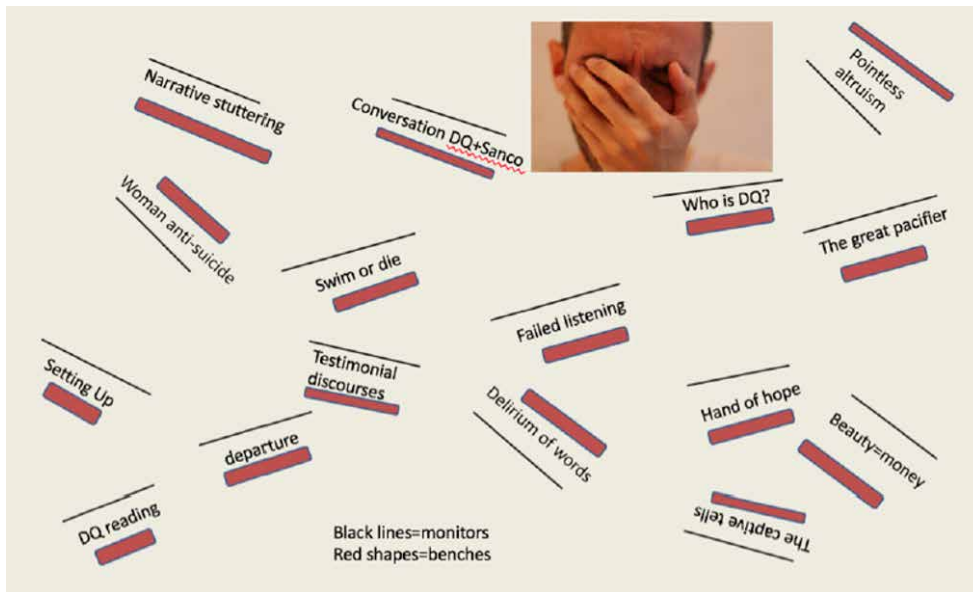


Fig. 3. Mieke Bal, project for the design of the 16-screen installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

What Françoise Davoine calls, citing historian Fernand Braudel: “*poussières d’événements*” (literally, dust of events) is the motto of this work’s form: sprinkling situations, moments, throughout the gallery space. This is adequate to the state of trauma presented in the pieces and in the juxtapositions among them. The disorderly display gives a shape, however unreadable and unclear, to the trauma-induced madness of the novel’s form.

Cervantes, I presume, was one of those “mad” ones. The trauma incurred by Cervantes after being held in captivity as a slave, has been beautifully traced in his writings and those of contemporary witnesses by Colombian literary historian María Antonia Garcés, a must-read book for anyone interested in Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, or slavery, then and now. Contemporary. As it happens, Garcés was held captive by the FARC terrorist guerillos for five months. This contemporaneity is incompatible with the ridiculing representation of the “mad Knight Errant” that is so routine, both in cinematic representations and in much of the scholarship. Supported by Garcés’s well-documented analysis, I

see a haunting autobiographical spirit in the three chapters on the *Captive* (pp. 39-41 of part I). But the shape of the theatrical display does not “re-present” the madness. It hints at it, makes us reflect on it.

The *Denkbild* is in the form, so that a contemporary aesthetic can reach out to, and touch, a situation of long ago that, as befits the stilled temporality of trauma, persists in the present. Through experimenting with possible forms of the art of video, we attempted to invent *new forms for the formlessness of trauma*. By means of image-thinking this installation had to answer to the paradoxical concept, or thought-image, of *the shape of formlessness*. Here, theatricality returns: ostensibly acting is the form that does not overrule the history, the violence, or the traumatic state. Acting, these videos suggest, is a social role. Acting, and making videos, exhibiting them in a thought-through immersive mode, is an attempt to give the formlessness of society a form. This is an attempt to do just that: to shape formlessness as the form of the traumatic state, by designing a display that is both theatrical, in that it appeals to empathy, and turns “live,” that primary characteristic of theatre, into “life,” which concerns the social reality we live in and are responsible to sustain; and the knowledge acquired through the integration of making, analysing, reflecting, and boldly proposing new insights.

Filmmaking begins with casting. In the case of *Don Quijote*, the actor cast himself; knowing he was the spitting image of the character as we know, or think we know him. An earlier significant casting decision occurred when Michelle Williams Gamaker and I decided to cast the three men in Emma’s life, in *Madame B*, in the same actor, suggesting the woman was in love with love and its promises of excitement, not with any man in particular.

I have made many films and installation pieces, over the last twenty years, and I guarantee you, there is

no more effective mode of doing research and developing ideas than integrating these two activities. You can learn more about these films on the relevant page of my website. So, let me end on my personal motto, already cited, which demands the remedy of immersion: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the *present* as *one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably.” This is pre-posterous history. The past without present is pointless. The present without past is empty. But as soon as we try to fix either one, the future disappears.

The Environmentality of Immersive Projection: The Nature of Scale



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Abstract

How does an artwork express an “environmentality?” Can we redefine immersion, in critical terms, as a form of environmental projection? In taking up such questions from my latest book, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*, my text addresses the relation between projection and environmentality in the visual arts in order to question immersivity. Confronted with the phenomenon of environmentalization, we need to re-imagine the ecology of representation. Positioning ecology as an environmental relation, I will consider its artistic imagination both historically and theoretically. I propose that we revisit the environmentality of media archaeology to understand how this impulse is furthered in current moving-image projections in the art gallery that call themselves immersive. I will especially address environmentality as it relates to movement and scale, questioning the relation between immersion and magnification. I will advance my argument by presenting the large-scale moving-image installations of the Danish-born, New York artist Jesper Just. Does magnification always, only imply spectatorial immersion? Other forms of experience arise when confronting an ecology of scale in art. What else happens when we scale? Can immersion be understood, more critically, as a form of environmental absorption? In recasting immersion in environmental terms, I propose that we consider absorption as empathic projection with space. In shifting from the human

subject's own immersive identification to this critically aware, enveloping *field* of empathic projection with the non-human, we can discard the prevalent human-centric position that pervades most immersive discourses. A different ecology of immersivity rises to the surface by relating the empathic “projective imagination” to “atmospheric thinking.”

Keywords [Atmospheric thinking](#) [Ecology of immersivity](#)
[Empathy and immersion](#) [Scale and magnification](#)
[Jesper Just](#)

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For some years now the activity of the artist in our society has been trending more toward the function of the ecologist: one who deals with environmental relationships. Ecology is the [...] pattern of relations between organisms and their environment.¹

How does an installation artist construct an atmosphere? What are the “elements” of its architecture – the visuals and sound – that design the ambiance of an aesthetic environment? In other words, how does an artwork express an “environmentality?” These questions are central to my latest book, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*, and will be reprised in this essay with regard to the topic of this publication.² I will address the relation between projection and environmentality in the visual arts with the aim of questioning the notion of immersivity and critiquing a strain of its dominant discourse. I am interested in exploring whether we can understand immersion as an atmospheric ambiance and redefine it, critically, as a form of environmental projection. We are indeed confronted today with various forms of environmentalization.³ This phenomenon asks us to reimagine the very ecology of immersivity.

I understand ecology, as Gene Youngblood prefigured in envisioning an “expanded cinema,” to be a fundamental form of environmental relation and relatedness. Such a form of relationality needs to be considered in the realms of history and geography in order to discern how the phenomenon of environmentalization affects the space of the visual arts and its transformations in time. In this respect, I propose that we reconsider the early history

1 G. Youngblood, “The Artist as Ecologist,” in *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970): 346.

2 See G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), which considers the interrelations of projection, atmosphere, and environment, linking “the projective imagination” to forms of “atmospheric thinking.”

3 See A. Pinotti, “Towards An-Iconology: The Image as Environment,” *Screen* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 594-603, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjaa060>.

of projection to account for the changes in its environment that are occurring in the arts and media of our time. I have long argued that an environmentality is rooted in the genealogy of the moving image in modernity.⁴ It was particularly present in the panoramic visual culture that emerged at the birth of the art of projection. The extensive phenomenon that involved spectators flocking to experience the enveloping ambiance of a panorama might be considered an early experiential form of immersivity.⁵ In an effort to recast immersion in this historic setting and understand it as a more panoramic and ambient situation, I will consider the environmentality of this form of media archaeology. I will do so in order to explore how a panoramic impulse is furthered in contemporary moving-image projections in the art gallery that call themselves immersive.

Such an exploration will redefine immersivity in spatiotemporal terms as an atmospheric envelopment, while analyzing the making of this ambient space in visual art. In linking up the early environmental impulse of pre-cinematic projection to the post-cinematic art installation of our times, I will especially address issues of movement and scale. I pursue this path of mobility and scaling to question the passivity, inactivity, and individuality that is usually attributed to immersivity, and to challenge a fixation on the subject's optical identification with the device that produces immersion. In contrast to these views that often color both the practice and discourse of immersion, I wish to establish a much less static and more haptic paradigm

4 See G. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London: Verso, 2002); and G. Bruno, "The Screen as Object: Art and the Atmospheres of Projection," in C. Iles, ed., *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016, exhibition catalogue): 156-67.

5 On the subject of early immersive views, see, among others, A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museum, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

that emphasizes the relational activation of spectatorial mobilities and the mobilizing force of atmosphere.

To this end, I will especially rethink the relation between immersion and a specific architecture: the “magnification” of the image. This phenomenon, first defined by early film theorist and filmmaker Jean Epstein, has itself today become magnified.⁶ In current popular and even theoretical discourses on virtual or augmented reality, there is a tendency to believe that a large projective image necessarily induces immersion. But do we really need to collapse these two notions? Does magnification always imply spectatorial immersion?

I am interested in pursuing other forms of experience that arise when confronting an *ecology* of scale. Scaling has long been practiced in art history, where magnification has gone hand in hand with miniaturization.⁷ And large scale has not always manifested itself as an immersive condition. Nor has it necessarily implied an affirmation of the sublime, with its immersive vision of boundless infinity and arresting effects of awe. In my view, the most interesting way of understanding scale is in relation to other aesthetic histories and especially as an architectural practice. This is because in architecture scaling is an essential tool for building an environment. Hence a central question for me is: What happens to a projective environment when we scale? Can the effects of large forms of scaling imply a critical awareness, a participatory relationality? Finally, can immersion be redefined, more critically, as an active, transformative form of absorption in an environment?

In recasting immersion in these different, more dynamic environmental terms, I propose that we consider its perceptual affects as well as effects. For immersive

6 See J. Epstein, “Magnification and Other Writings,” *October*, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 9-25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778434>.

7 For a treatment of scale in art history, see J. Kee, E. Lugli, eds., *To Scale* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

effects are indeed affects. To be aesthetically absorbed in space mobilizes a particular affect: a feeling of empathy and sympathy with the space itself – the atmosphere – in which one is immersed. As an aesthetic practice, absorption engages an empathic “projection” into an environment. It is a form of envelopment in an atmosphere. And thus, to move away from optical immersivity toward an awareness of this atmospheric environmentality, I suggest in my book turning to theories of empathy and sympathies with space, and advancing their discourse in contemporary ways.⁸

Let me simply mention here the writings of Theodor Lipps, who developed a vision of *Einfühlung*, or *in-feeling*, as a spatial empathy, and whose notion of empathic projection in ambiance possessed an atmospheric quality and tonality that aligns closely with the discourse on *Stimmung*.⁹ This atmospheric, tonal interpretation of the transmission of affects in art has been inspirational to my work, and some aspects of empathy and sympathy appear to be returning, with different interpretations, in other new materialist, “sympathetic” forms of aesthetic philosophy.¹⁰

With the specific aim here of expanding the projective reach of absorption in aesthetic space, one might turn in particular to “the laying bare of empathic projection” as recently reconsidered by Michael Fried.¹¹ The art historian has long been interested in the “the invention of

8 For further articulation of this subject, see G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection*, especially: chapters 2-3.

9 See, among others, T. Lipps, “Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure” (1905), in K. Aschenbrenner, A. Isenberg, eds, *Aesthetic Theories: Studies in the Philosophy of Art* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965): 403-12; H. F. Mallgrave, E. Ikonomou, eds., *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994).

10 See J. Bennett, “Of Material Sympathies, Paracelsus, and Whitman,” in S. Iovino, S. Oppermann, eds., *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014): 239-52; J. Bennett, *Influx & Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

11 M. Fried, “The Laying Bare of Empathic Projection,” in *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2011): 205-15. For a different interpretation of empathy in art, grounded in the political force of trauma and sensitive to its cultural memory, see J. Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

absorption.”¹² what he calls “a powerful mode of emotional communication [that] can be actuated by absolutely minimal physiognomic and gestural means.”¹³ Such a minimal, non-representational form of “empathic projection” communicates an *atmosphere* of inner absorption. It is interesting that Fried borrows the term “empathic projection” from the philosopher Stanley Cavell, for whom this is a path for overcoming the borders of separation and creating “a seam in human experience.”¹⁴

If understood as such a *projection*, an immersive process can create relational seams that are atmospheric joinings and affective joints. To perceive empathy with space is to sense the ecology of its atmospheric, situational existence in time. This experience of an atmospheric tonality has the connective capacity to bridge the divide between subjects and objects. An empathic absorption in an environment further connects the human and the nonhuman, creating an experiential seam between the animate and the inanimate. If we become attuned to sensing immersivity as such an active, interstitial space of relation, we can access an ecology of relationality that is not confined to anthropocentric modalities. Environmentality, then, offers a way not only to reclaim empathic projection in art but to project it into larger ecologies.

In the form of “empathic projection” practiced in the art of cine-projection, the work of technology extends to the surroundings, and this affects its atmosphere. The projective apparatus itself plays an important part in this process of absorption. A deeper absorptive modality surfaces in environmental artworks that do not hide their own

12 M. Fried, “Four Honest Outlaws:” 208.

13 M. Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 76-7.

14 S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 425.

projective mechanism in their temporality and spatiality.¹⁵ The energy of a diffused projective empathy is mobilized when a self-reflexive technology reveals its own mechanism at play, laying it bare and activating it in ambiance. If we recast immersivity with this sense of environmentality – that is, with awareness of the cultural techniques that make it possible – we can discard the prevalent human-centric, perspectival position that pervades most immersive discourses. We can overcome the fixation on the human subject’s visual identification and singular preoccupation with the projective apparatus, especially those of VR or AR, to focus instead on the inanimate, the environment, and the natural realm. It is time to stop putting individuality and opticality at the center of immersivity, and to pursue a more critically aware, haptic *field* of empathic projections. In this way, a different ecology of immersivity and relationality can rise to the surface in enveloping forms of environmental screening that link the “projective imagination” to an “atmospheric thinking.”

Environmentality and Empathic Projection in Art

Having laid out my theoretical premises, let me now turn to an artistic practice that is in line with what I have proposed. I like to think closely, along and through the work of contemporary artists who perform analytical gestures of environmental projection. Hence, I will pursue my critical argumentation about immersion by navigating through the work of the Danish-born, New York-based artist Jesper Just, whose forms of empathic projection express an atmospheric thinking. I will specifically address the manifestation of

15 On this subject, see K. Wilder, “Projective Art and the ‘Staging’ of Empathic Projection,” *Moving Image Review & Art Journal* 5, no. 1-2 (2016): 125-40, <https://doi.org/10.1386/miraj.5.1-2.124> 1. Wilder analyzes in particular the experimental landscape films of Chris Welsby.

scale and the magnification of the image in these works to challenge the notion that these are totalizing immersive conditions. His work will also enable us to rethink a crucial architectural component of immersivity: the design of an installation.

A projection that is “environ-mental” – that creates a psychic atmosphere of empathy with space, its size and motion – arises in the ambiance of Just’s moving-image installation *This Nameless Spectacle*, presented several times since 2011. This is due to the self-aware design and spatial construction of the installation. As viewers walk into the gallery space, they confront two very large screens that face each other. Each screen measures approximately twenty meters in length by five meters in height. As they are also placed more than twenty meters apart, it is hard to escape the sense of magnitude of this projection.¹⁶ The massive scale of the installation provokes a physical reaction, demanding that the viewers become not simply immersed but rather “incorporated” into it. Indeed, one cannot help being absorbed into the space of this projection, empathetically enveloped in its atmosphere.

To understand what is going on in this magnified ambiance of projection, gallery viewers must position themselves in the midst of this moving work and negotiate a space between the large ambient screens. Moving along the course of the gallery, not only a physical displacement but also an imaginary motion takes hold of one’s body. A form of “empathic projection” is triggered here because the work lays bare its exhibitionary mechanism, showing off its magnificent projective scale in moving form.

Confronting this particularly large species of screen, and the distance that both isolates and unites the

¹⁶ *This Nameless Spectacle* was conceived and exhibited with these dimensions as part of the monographic exhibition *This Unknown Spectacle*, devoted to the work of Jesper Just, on view October 21, 2011-February 5, 2012, at MAC/VAL, Musée d’Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, France.

two screen entities, one's habitual relation to space, even the space of one's body, changes. Different types of scaling are confronted, haptically sensed, resulting in a sculptural experience of screen architecture. As the projective screen becomes a sculptural object, it impels the viewer to become more aware of volumes. One constantly has to measure the scale of one's body against the scale of this milieu of projection.

Corporeally absorbed in the space of this video work, rather than being optically, passively immersed, viewers physically experience a form of spatial, even atmospheric "perturbation." Nothing is static on these encompassing screens, including the landscape they present. At the beginning of the film, the camera tracks through the space of a park. An atmosphere blossoms into being here: as the light shimmers on the leaves of trees for a long while, the sound of movement can be heard. You follow the sound cue that propels you to continue through the space of the park, sensing its atmosphere, breathing its "air."¹⁷ There is a breeze, and the tree branches tremble and quiver. The motion of leaves in the wind on one screen always finds corresponding atmospheric movement on the other. These screens, you discover, always move in unison, often giving the impression of a movement advancing through space. Different views and vistas are presented, and you feel as if you were actually "tracking" through the park, sympathetically absorbing its atmospheric scenery.

17 As further developed in *Atmospheres of Projection*, an "air" is here understood to be the atmosphere of a site, and an affect that affects us. On the effects of air in painting, see G. Didi-Huberman, "The Imaginary Breeze: Remarks on the Air of the Quattrocento," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 3 (2003): 275-89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412903002003001>; S. Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion, 2010).

Panorama of a Historical Movement, while Absorbed in the Atmosphere of a Park

A park [is] a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region [...] a “thing-for-us.”¹⁸

As you navigate the sea of images of this environment, you end up displaced back in time as well as destabilized by atmospheric perturbations. The scale of the installation space communicates a geology of stratified temporalities and nonlinear times. With *This Nameless Spectacle*, Just has created a post-cinematic ride that takes us inside the prehistory of large-scale visual display. As it transports us through the atmosphere of the park, it leads us to rediscover the environmental configuration of modern visual culture and the emergence of a form of immersive projection from its very atmosphere.

The point of entry that Just stages for *This Nameless Spectacle* is the Parc des Buttes Chaumont, a public garden, developed as part of the plan for remodeling the urban fabric of Paris directed by Georges-Eugène Haussmann. The manner in which Just films in this park, employing scale and movement in its depiction, reveals the cultural ambiance of environmentalization of which the park is a part. In the nineteenth century, an ambient movement arose across diverse cultural expressions, including landscape design. Moving along the path of modernity from view painting to garden views, from travel sketches to itinerant viewing boxes, from panoramas and other geographical “-oramas” to forms of interior/exterior mapping, from the mobile views of train travel to urban promenades, a transformative experience of spatial absorption was born. This

18 R. Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape,” in N. Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, (New York: New York University Press, 1979): 119.

new geography was the product of a “panoramic vision” that dynamically reconfigured the environment.¹⁹

In this novel geovisuality, sites were set in moving perspectives, expanding both outward and inward as they were absorbed and consumed in movement by the spectator. This new ambient sensibility engaged the physicality of the observers, challenging their ability to take in a mobilized space. And from this moving panorama at the end of the nineteenth century a new observer emerged in the persona of the film spectator, a body empathically “projected” into an environment of moving images.²⁰

With *This Nameless Spectacle*, Jesper Just impels us to travel back to this history of “site-seeing.” He employs a panoramic mode of spatio-visual construction, and does so to expand the potential of this precinematic history in our times. Absorbed in this projective space, one can experience in particular the sense of scale and the atmospheric touch of garden vistas. Garden views created the experience of embracing an environmental terrain, and of being enveloped in its ambiance. They combined a sensualist theory of the imagination with a touch of physicality. The garden designs of modernity engaged the corporeality of the body in the moving absorption of an environment. Automata, sculptures, and playful fluid mechanisms that included fountains and watery landscapes enhanced this natural atmospherics, as is the case with the Parisian park Just films. The vistas themselves incited viewers to move into the transformation of an ambiance. Ultimately, then,

19 See W. Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

20 For a more extensive treatment of the history of modern, mobilized space, see, among others, G. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*; A. Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006); F. Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); L. Charney, V.R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

landscape offered the body an ever-changing experience of atmospheric spatio-visual display.

As one ponders the origin of this embracing space – a landscape of “atmospheric screening” – one realizes why Just chose this setting for *This Nameless Spectacle*. This is an installation that enhances the material apparatus of visual display to create an environmental projection. Landscape is not at all a simple background here but rather the moving core of a technology of projection that self-reflexively incorporates a historical setting in its very ambiance. Its design holds within itself the actual movement in space that led from garden views to the establishment of the filmic screen as a place for pictures to be “sensed” in projective, atmospheric motion.

This Nameless Spectacle reminds us that the garden, like the cinema, is not an optical but a haptical affair, inviting empathy with space. The picturesque garden, in particular, was the place that historically “enable[d] the imagination to form the habit of feeling through the eye.”²¹ It was an affective “mode of processing the physical world for our consumption.”²² This modern landscape initiated a form of immersivity that is a virtual form of touch, putting us “in touch” with inner space and engaging all senses synesthetically in shifting sensations of ambiance. Empathic projection would be felt as one’s interiority was mobilized in the process of relational connection with the natural site. A reciprocal, sympathetic relation with the nuances of ambiance was thus established in architecting the atmosphere of the garden.

In moving through the Parisian park in *This Nameless Spectacle*, Just retraces this ambient genealogy of modernity: the mobilization of atmosphere, understood

21 C. Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1927): 4.

22 J. Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992): 4.

also as affective ambiance, in an environmental process that traveled from landscape design to cine-projection. In this ambient sense, as the shimmering light of the projection, the breath of air, and the motion of the wind come to be virtually sensed on one's skin, a real atmospheric "perturbation" can be felt in the installation. Even an effect of weather arises in this empathic projection. And so environmental phenomena that are present in a natural landscape come to join the very atmosphere of projection.

Environments of Projection: A Digital Mareorama

Announcing an upheaval in the relation of art to technology, panoramas are at the same time an expression of a new attitude toward life.²³

In the context of this environmental panorama, the technique of projective display of *This Nameless Spectacle* is also to be considered, especially as it regards absorption in scale. The spatial arrangement of the work, set on two large screens that appear to roll out moving images for a spectator in their midst, mediates a haptic, atmospheric communication that clearly reinvents modernity's panoramic forms of immersive exhibition. This contemporary mode of enveloping display exhibits a fluid technological history of environmentality, especially in its way of mobilizing scale. In its gigantic mobility, it specifically recalls the technique of the "moving panorama."

A product of nineteenth-century's exhibitionary culture, the panorama form is usually associated with enormous paintings exhibited in circular spaces, surrounding

23 W. Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century (Exposé of 1935)," in *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press-Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

the observer with the weight of their scale.²⁴ One application of this giant form of display included movement. Inspired by the circular panorama, the moving panorama was particularly engaged with geography.²⁵ A popular form of entertainment across Europe and the United States, moving panoramas offered spectators the sensation that they themselves were being transported as images of space scrolled panoramically before their eyes, with sound and light effects that enhanced the overall sense of transport.

The apparatus of display played an important part in the construction of this absorbing geography, which was not merely representational. A framed fabric of drawable curtains, moved by a mechanical cranking system, could suffice to produce the effect of a moving screen, turning into an enveloping scrolling screen. But more complex mechanisms were also devised, and the most advanced were exhibited at the 1900 Exposition Universelle Internationale, in Paris. The Stereorama, for one, let spectators imagine they were taking a sea voyage, sailing along the Mediterranean coast, aboard a ship rocked by waves. This elaborate form of environmental display involved a feat of technological imagination and execution. The point of this technique of moving exhibition was the scale of motion. “Unlike the usual panoramas,” as a contemporary article tells us, “the background is painted on the outer mantle of a slowly revolving cylinder with a wide protruding edge carrying forty concentric sheet-metal screens four inches in height on which the waves have been painted.” As for the screens, they “are moved up and down by an electric

24 See, among other works, R. Hyde, *Panoromania! The Art and Entertainment of the “All-Embracing” View*, (London: Trefoil-Barbican Art Gallery, 1988, exhibition catalogue); S. Bordini, *Storia del panorama. La visione totale nella pittura del XIX secolo* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1984); K. Trumpener, T. Barringer, eds., *On the Viewing Platform: The Panorama between Canvas and Screen* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

25 As media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo shows in his comprehensive history of these panoramas, motion, both virtual and actual, was an essential sensory component of this particular precinematic form, which produced kinesthetic effects in the audience. See E. Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013): 46-54.

motor through a linkage system including rods, hinges, and wheels.”²⁶

Considering this history of exhibition, we can venture to propose that the invention of the projection of moving images on a screen, and the function of active immersivity that is reinvented today, arose from the *scale* of the enterprise of the moving panorama, which not only produced scrolling motion and waves of perturbation but was also an itinerant medium.²⁷ Spectators were offered the virtual sensation of being absorbed in a journey through the shifting atmospheres of a landscape.²⁸ With this public spectacle, open to the environment, a majestic, virtual form of imaging atmospheric change took hold of one’s body. The panoramic object of display, capable of offering the pleasure of scrolling through an ambiance, thus created the material condition of existence of the cinematic screen as itself a space of atmospheric projection.

The projective screen, then, did not come into being as a small, flat, frontal, windowed geometry, as is usually assumed in some media studies, but rather as a gigantic geographic and moving display.²⁹ In other words, the screen emerged as an *environmental medium*. It is important to acknowledge this lack of frontality, fixity, and flatness in early forms of screening, and to underscore an expansive milieu of volumetric plasticity and movement, if we wish to rewrite the genealogic course of the projective

26 “Die neuesten Panoramen,” in *De Natuur* (1900): 257-58, as cited in S. Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (1980), trans. D. L. Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997): 177.

27 This was an apparatus of haptic mobility, for it not only produced scrolling motion and waves of perturbation with its mechanism but was also an itinerant medium. It was often taken from place to place by itinerant showmen.

28 A particularly precinematic development of this traveling medium, also presented at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, was the exhibition *Trans-Siberian Railway Panorama*, which simulated a trip from Moscow to Beijing aboard the famous railway. A succession of images of the diverse environment viewers were imaginatively traversing appeared as if rolling past a framed window of the train car.

29 In arguing that the screen performs an environmental operation, and challenging a narrow interpretation of its geometry, I specifically respond to claims put forth in L. Manovich, “The Screen and the User,” in *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001): 94-115.

apparatus as a set of environmental operations. It is crucial as well to stress for my argument regarding the atmospheric ecology of visual display that, in the moving panorama, atmosphere was not only displayed but cultivated. The display constituted an environment in itself, and it was capable of registering change in the atmosphere of a site.

The changes in ambiance were at times enhanced by cutouts that depicted objects in the surrounding scenery, moving in zones that extended from the foreground to trees far out in the field. Rotating in endless loops around the scrolling canvas of the panorama, these cutouts “projected” a sense of depth to the transformation of the landscape. Multiple backdrops operated at different speeds to create a sense of rolling vistas, with the added effect that the differences in speed between each of them created variable combinations of scenes. In this display, which turned a means of transport into the emerging cinematic screen, endowing it with the ability to modify an ambiance, the scale of the display was as relevant as the rolling, diffracted, dispersed movement.

An Oceanic Voyage from Postcinema to Precinema

As this form of “projective imagination” merged, at time of modernity, with an “atmospheric thinking,” a projective future was also envisaged, for inscribed here is also the kind of magnification that characterizes display in our digital age. As we ponder the elaborate construction of Just’s *This Nameless Spectacle*, it becomes evident that his giant installation has, built into it, a mechanism that reinvents the environmental history of projective display we have just outlined. In its digital configuration, it creates virtual traveling through atmospheres that reenact the

immersive ambiance and environmentality of the moving panorama.

The perambulating movement through the Parc des Buttes Chaumont recalls in particular the function of the early roll transparencies created by Louis Carrogis de Carmontelle, representing the moving vistas of the Parc Monceau, near Paris.³⁰ But it is not only the motion of the representation that creates the emotion and triggers the empathic projection with the garden space but also the moving mechanism of the projective *dispositif*, and especially its scale. The corresponding, diffracted motion that occurs in the space of the installation, not simply on but *between* the two large screens that face each other, is laid bare, and it is closely connected to the empathy with space created in a particularly absorptive form of moving panorama.

The configuration of Just's moving-image installation recalls especially the dynamic, atmospheric use of display that characterized the environment of the Mareorama.³¹ This was a spectacular form of moving panorama that used two "screens" simultaneously, rolling out a set of moving scenes that simulated the atmosphere of a voyage at sea. Spectators were positioned in the middle of the display, aboard a ship, which rocked back and forth to enhance the sensation of motion and perturbation of being projected into the natural environment of a seascape. An article written at the time tells us that

the plan for the Mareorama presented [...] two screens, each 2,500 feet long and forty feet in height [...] to be unrolled," with "a double, swinging movement [that] was to be imparted to the spectator's platform which was shaped like a ship.

30 See E. Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion*: 40-6.

31 The topic of the moving panorama was discussed in an interview with the artist in New York on September 16, 2011. Just has generously shared his artistic process with me on several other occasions, for which I thank him.

The scale of the scrolling screens was grandiose, for “215,000 square feet of screen was to be unrolled before the visitor’s eye.” And the movement produced was impressive and destabilizing: “One of the screens moves on the port side, the other on the starboard.”³² In addition to this mechanics of perturbation, elaborate effects reproduced atmospheric changes related to different times of day and rendered shifts in weather and actual perturbations.

Absorption in the Mareorama was an experience of unfolding events in a floating, situational ambiance – even in climatic perturbation – precisely as happens in Just’s installation. Viewers were sandwiched between two giant, moving screens that enhanced the sensation of taking in an atmosphere and experiencing its changing states. All the kinesthetic effects made the visitors to the space of the Mareorama not only feel the motions but empathize with them. In a similar manner, spectators of Just’s installation who negotiate their own movement between complex apparatuses of rolling projective display, do so kinesthetically, imaginatively, and virtually as well as with actual motion.

In *This Nameless Spectacle*, architectural magnitude contributes greatly to the empathic absorption in the shifting, fluid ambiance, that is, in the environment itself of the projection.³³ The Mareorama “ship” could accommodate seven hundred spectators. Just’s double-screen movement likewise relies on the scale of the gallery in which it is exhibited, and on a physically grandiose sense of space that underscores the environmental root of the emergence

32 S. Oettermann, “Die neuesten Panoramen,” in *The Panorama*: 179.

33 Although conceived in the extremely large format discussed, the screens have been adapted to the architecture of the gallery site for subsequent exhibitions. A reduced scale, for instance, at J. Cohan in New York in 2012, created a more intimate feeling for the spectator, who was sandwiched between the still-large screens of the mareoramic display.

of projection in forms of giant, moving display.³⁴ The Mareorama ultimately magnified the sensory, sympathetic impact of exposure to an affecting atmosphere; following its currents, Just's own liquid mode of exhibition activates this ambient "sense" of display in installation form in its own empathic projection. Laying bare the projective *dispositif* that turns the gallery space into a moving vessel, it makes it into a vehicle of atmospheric perturbations. In this sense, the space of the art gallery constitutes a real part of the installation, and the persona of the gallery viewer becomes, quite poignantly, "installed."

On this screen interface, the turn of the last century thus joins the beginning of the new millennium in a reflection on the environment of projection and its cultural ecology. Just links together the energy of potentiality that characterized the space of visual display in early modernity with the potential expressed today when experimenting environmentally with digital technology. The artist not only shows us how central the environment of projection is in our time but argues that the desire for absorption in geographic display is truly enduring. Ultimately, *This Nameless Spectacle* demonstrates how the large-scale architecture of the screen has traveled across time in projection while exhibiting the screen itself as an environment, even an ambient architecture – the atmospheric form in which projection comes into being, and can even dissolve.

34 Just's installation returns us to that historically dynamic, multiple form of ambient display without, however, reproducing the construction literally. He does not exhibit the actual machine or mechanism that is at the origin of the work but rather incorporates the scale of the Mareorama and its movement across screens in the physical spatiality of the installation, which encompasses the transit of viewers in gallery space. In this sense, the installation does not follow the trend of display that has been spreading since the arrival of the digital age, in which artists have taken to exhibiting outmoded forms of visual technology in the gallery. Just does not belabor the obsolescence of the cinematic apparatus or its panoramic predecessor or show any sense of nostalgia for older forms of display. *This Nameless Spectacle* rather works at historicizing from within, reinventing the possibilities of screening expressed by the moving, modern mode of ambient display that gave rise to the cinematic era of projection.

Scaling an Environment

As screens become prominently incorporated into both our private and public lives, the work of scalar reinterpretation that Just pursues becomes particularly significant, for a reinvention of the act of screening in the environment is especially pressing today. Screens proliferate in widely different forms in our surroundings. They have decreased in size, becoming more portable: computers, smart phones, and iPads, which enable us to scroll haptically, now travel with us at all times as our personal panoramas. The rise of the miniature form goes hand in hand with magnification. In contrast to the shrinking size of our personal screens, we are witnessing an increasing use of the gigantic as screens have become especially magnified in the spectacle of three-dimensional exhibition.

Digital technology has enlarged the possibilities of projection in expanded cinematic forms of immersivity. Large-scale panoramic forms of projection, such as LED video walls, proliferate and have changed the very panorama of our environment, creating a veritable immersive screenscape.³⁵ The technique of 3-D projection mapping, in particular, can turn an entire building or landscape into a screen environment.³⁶ Heirs of the atmospheres of “*son et lumière*” shows, and of modernity’s dioramas and panoramic spectacles, these magnified projections can even design a performative environment. A haptic, immersive landscape is digitally fashioned as the façade of an edifice

35 On the urban screen, see, among others, S. McQuire, M. Martin, S. Niederer, eds., *Urban Screens Reader* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2009); N. Verhoeff, “Screens in the City,” in D. Chateau, J. Moure, eds., *Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016): 125-39; C. Berry, J. Harbord, R. Moore, eds., *Public Space, Media Space* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

36 S. Chakravorty, “Spaces of Spectatorship: Architectures of the Projected Image,” *Polished Panels* 1, no. 2, *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* (March 7, 2016), <http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2016/03/spaces-of-spectatorship-architectures-of-the-projected-image/>, accessed August 30, 2023. In projection mapping, a two- or three-dimensional object is spatially mapped by using specialized software that mimics the real environment it is to be projected upon. This software can interact with a projector to fit any desired image onto any surface, small or large.

turns into a projective skin. Cities are punctuated by these seductive large-scale projective envelopes that create ambiance.

But in projection mapping, the idea of an environment of projection risks becoming literalized. If the ambiance of projection is remapped in a reductive way, the notion of ambient media itself shrinks. The effects of media façades created in literal ways are often questionable, as “ambient” begins to take on environmental connotations that are pacifying and not far removed from commerce.³⁷ After all, large-scale projection mapping is mostly used, contiguously with artistic and urban-branding pursuits, by publicity and advertising firms. Basking in the glow of giant projections can lead to opiate effects or the simple encouragement of consumption as opposed to the production of engagement and perturbation.

As the ambiance of projection is being transformed by digital technology, artists are increasingly responding creatively and critically to these issues of the sculptural and panoramic scale of immersive projection. Just, for instance, critically exposed how large-scale projection transforms the urban environment with the projection of his *Servitudes* (2015), a cinematic, architectural work consisting of eight sequences filmed in and around the World Trade Center in New York. Originally conceived for the subterranean gallery space of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, this filmic work was scaled up in November 2015 and displayed on a series of large electronic billboards on the building façades of New York’s Times Square. In 2019, the same work was also projected onto layers of semitransparent fabric in yet another geographic location, in museum space – a fact that makes one question the function of scaling as well as further reflect on the nature

³⁷ For a critical reading of the ambient, see P. Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); S. Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience and Other Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

and fabric of projection in relation to its specific geography and location.³⁸

Projecting a Global Urban Scale

These experiments on the vast projective potential of digital technology thus force us to rethink the issue of large-scale immersive projection in light of its own complex history. It is particularly urgent to ask ourselves questions about the nature and consequences of scaling. What changes in an environment of projection when subjected to different scales? How does scale change the nature of the screen itself as an object? What kinds of projection, understood as forms of cultural transmission, does magnification comport?

With this variability of scale, *Servitudes* reinforces the penchant for “empathic” projection that Just exhibited in his earlier works, for, as we have noted, this process is set in motion when works actively lay bare their own projective mechanism rather than keeping it static and invisible. *Intercourses*, which premiered at the 2013 Venice Biennale, took this up at a global scale.³⁹ This five-channel video and installation was set in a suburb of Hangzhou, China, that has been built as a replica of Paris, France. The

38 When this work was commissioned by Paris’s Palais de Tokyo for their expansive subterranean gallery space, Just began to research the exhibition hall, which dates from Paris’s 1937 world’s fair. The 2015 projection of *Servitudes* in New York’s Times Square was part of Times Square Arts, the public art program of the Times Square Alliance. *Servitudes* was installed on semitransparent screen fabric in Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen, Denmark, June 15 - August 11, 2019.

39 Reflecting on how a pavilion at the Biennale represents a country inside another country, Just engaged the architectural configuration of this conflated projection and intervened in the site of the Danish Pavilion, itself a composite structure. By walling in the grand entrance of the building’s neoclassic façade, he enticed viewers to walk around the colonnade and enter instead through a courtyard, which ushered them inside the modernist part of the pavilion. Here, the interior space had been transformed into a construction site. Walls built from concrete cinder blocks created another architectural path within the already hybrid space of the pavilion. The rough, impermanent fabrication of the concrete blocks lent a sense of eeriness to the site: though it appeared to be a place in the making, it felt as if it were already in ruins. In constructing an installation space that evoked the atmosphere of a ruin in progress, Just made material the layered process inherent in the imaginary fabrication of such sites, closely engaging their imaginative “projections.”

large scale of the projection inside the pavilion created a feeling of cultural displacement. In it, three Black men meander in a desolate ambiance of empty streets, uninhabited façades, and unfinished staircases that lead nowhere. This Paris imagined in China had a postapocalyptic feeling, even a quasi–science fiction dimension, despite actually being a real place. The projected images worked together with the architectural design of the pavilion to instill in us a concrete sense of how a global urban imaginary is made, and what scale this process has assumed. What is performed and projected here is a becoming of global scale – a state that contains processes of dislocation, hybridization, and entropy.

Intercourses is named after that which lies in between: relational things like processes of interstitial construction. It deals with the actual process of projection as a space of relation and intermediation. In this sense, it follows the course of Just’s investigation of environmentality as a magnified psychogeography. The very magnitude of the exhibition space drives a navigation of atmospheres, engaging viewers in the scale of the destabilizing projective ambiance in which they are themselves empathically projected.

Intercourses confronts even more directly than *This Nameless Spectacle* the effects and affects of the technology of scaling in contemporary digital culture. This is a work of actual scalar construction, for its five screens have different configurations that generate further geographic dislocation through their differing positions in space and angles of view. Moreover, this Paris-in-China suspended between states of ruin and construction offers projections that can vary radically in size, from one to fifteen meters, depending on the site of the installation.

In such a way, Just questions the different forms of screen scale that proliferate in our digital environment. In laying bare the architecture of the projective

mechanism, he triggers a critical response to the cultural phenomenon of variable screen size, making us reflect on how miniaturization relates to magnification in digital culture. By confronting what happens in the process of scaling up or down, from one size to the other, he creates cultural awareness of the state of screening today while exhibiting the process itself of flexible projection. This architectural scaling makes gallery viewers aware of the very architecture of screening, and especially attuned to how ambiance changes in scale.

Furthermore, for Just, large scale does not consist in simple magnification or simplistic immersivity. The magnitude of the largest screen in *Intercourses*, rather, challenges the conventional use of magnitude in film.⁴⁰ Less associated with figurative facial close-ups, as is traditionally most often the case in cinema, it is more attuned to the vastness and complexity of the geographic and cultural landscapes it renders. Scale is here also anything but monumental and does not constitute a direct correlate of the aesthetic of the sublime, so often evoked when speaking of immersion. Rather than monumentalizing its own object, the large scale of the projection takes the gallery viewer into an ambiguous affective and cognitive space that asks for attentive, even contemplative absorption – displaying a critical form of empathic projection.

This process of projective absorption in scale leads to deciphering the geographic hybridity of the site shown on screen while enveloped in the siting of the projection. After all, wandering through a look-alike Paris with French actors of African descent, one could easily believe that this is in fact Paris – and that would be an acceptable response. But if, galvanized by the scale of the large screen, the installation viewer scans the surface and “screens” the

40 On magnification and the close-up in film, see M. A. Doane, *Bigger than Life: The Close-up and Scale in the Cinema* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

space closely, she can sense that something is off: the urban scale here is quite different than that of Paris. As one tunes in to surface, scale, and atmosphere, scanning the big screen, and further notices the presence of Chinese inscriptions or too many air conditioners dotting the building façades, one can finally understand how, working with and against architecture, inhabitants of this replica of Paris in China, located in the district of Tianducheng, adapt the space to their own use.

In *Intercourses*, then, Just enhances scale as a geography, detecting defining nuances in ambient projection and working with dimension in culturally affecting ways that defy the simple effect of immersive viewing. Here, immersion is not understood, as conventionally assumed, to produce virtual illusion but, rather, spatial awareness. As was the case in *This Nameless Spectacle*, the artist also works specifically against the astonishing use of magnification one finds in digital hyperrealism, with its purely spectacular effects of immersivity.⁴¹ For Just, scale rather functions as a real environmental modality. His installations invite close discernment of the surrounding space and engage contact with the larger environment. They resist using scale as a building block to create virtual monuments and, working with movement and active screening, also resist the arresting sense of awe associated with boundless immersive magnitude. In other words, Just is an artist who does not fall into the trap of large projection as mere manifestation of a technological sublime.

Jesper Just's critical investigation of this pressing subject of immersivity finds correspondence in the practices of other artists who are attentive to scale, reconfigure scalar paradigms, and also engage the panoramic form of exhibition as a projective environment. In a compelling way,

41 This reminds us that, as Susan Stewart suggested long ago, "the gigantic" is a particularly enveloping notion. See S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

Lisa Reihana also questioned the scale and atmosphere of immersive projection at the New Zealand Pavilion of the 2017 Venice Biennale with her large-scale installation *In Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (2015-17), for which she reinvented the giant form of the panoramic spectacle in scrolling digital fashion. Inspired by the French scenic wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804-1805), the installation created a large-scale panorama in which real and invented narratives of colonial encounter take place. This work took the very surface of a panoramic wallpaper and made it into an animated, moving surface of unfolding projection. Here, videographic and animation technologies contribute to a reimagination of the nineteenth-century shape of the moving panorama while probing its historical, ideological, and political dimensions. In Reihana's reinterpretation of this mode, history is not only displayed but scrolls out and drifts along panoramically, in a critical reading that questions the very form of its spectacular, colonial, scalar, immersive projections.

In the face of digitally magnified immersion, and the return of the spectacular phenomenon of large-scale panoramic projection, one can only welcome the kind of environmental research that motivates Jesper Just and Lisa Reihana, for this is an exploration that is aimed at critically excavating, and exhibiting, the complex history of large-scale, immersive visual display, its forms of mediality, and the culture that it transmits and circulates in the environment. Here, the present not only exposes but challenges the past, and finally, changes its course. Only if we are put in a position to experience critically the cultural atmosphere that links scale and motion to immersive screening, and consider this multifaceted, nonlinear historicity, can we hope to redefine the terms of, and give a new name to, the ecology of absorption in space – the environment itself of projection.

Art and Artifice: The Machine of Immersivity in the Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber Of The Giants



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Abstract

Art in general, more than other fields, appears to lie at the heart of immersivity. As argued by Oliver Grau, it is art that still deploys a considerable genealogy with examples that resonate with the immersivity as proposed in contemporaneity. It is the current immersivity that constructs “constellations” which, as Benjamin put it, dynamically enact “the history of art [as] the history of prophecies [...] which can be written only starting from the point of view of an immediate present,” where “every present is determined by those images that are synchronous to it: each now is the now of a given knowability.” In the art history field, however, it is almost mandatory to re-evolve a fully mannerist ambience where “painting” creates – without the aid of particular instruments – the near-total immersion, acting fully on the passional dimension. The case in point is the Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants, made by Giulio Romano between 1532 and 1536 in Palazzo Te in Mantua. A stunning illusionist artifice that catapults the viewers into the heart of the ongoing event, to produce in them a sense of awe and estrangement beyond the “frame.”

Keywords [Image](#) [Immersivity](#) [Giulio Romano](#) [Painting](#) [Fiction](#)

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A piece many years
in doing and now newly performed by that rare
Italian master, Julio Romano, who, had he himself
eternity and could put breath into his work, would
beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her
ape.¹

By way of introduction

Undoubtedly – in a chronological field conventionally defined as Mannerism – the Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber of the Giants, frescoed between 1532 and 1536 by Giulio Romano and his collaborators in Palazzo Te in Mantua, occupies a position of great importance. The highly original solution adopted by the Roman artist, already acknowledged in his day and age, in the light of today’s immersive technologies, can indeed manifest all its extraordinary innovative force.²

Virtual reality, as we know it today, is obtained by means of a digital instrument capable of generating “three-dimensional” scenes, narratives and landscapes within which subjects have the impression of actually moving and interacting with the ambience surrounding them. Thanks to the evolution in computer graphics and the implementation of the computational power, representations ever

1 W. Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale* (1611) (New York-London-Toronto-Sydney: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1998): V.II.95-100, 219.

2 The bibliography concerning Palazzo Te is currently rather substantial, but it was Ernst Gombrich who took this whole building outside of the shadows in which it found itself. In 1933 he dedicated to it his graduation thesis at the University of Vienna, E. Gombrich, “Der Palazzo del Te,” *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, no. 8 (1934): 79-104; “Versuch einer Deutung,” *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, no. 9 (1936): 121-150; it. trans. A.M. Conforti, *Giulio Romano. Il palazzo del Te* (Mantua: Tre Lune, 1984). Cfr. among the many others F. Hart, *Giulio Romano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); K.W. Forster, R.J. Tuttle, “The Palazzo del Te,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 30, no. 4 (1971): 267-293; A. Belluzzi, W. Capezzali, *Il palazzo dei lucidi inganni: Palazzo Te a Mantova* (Florence: Centro Studi Architettura Ouroboros, 1976); E. Verheyen, *The Palazzo del Te in Mantua: Images of Love and Politics* (Baltimore-London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977); A. Belluzzi, M. Tafuri, eds., *Giulio Romano* (Milan: Electa, 1989, exhibition catalogue); A. Belluzzi, *Palazzo Te a Mantova*, 2 vols. (Modena: Cosimo Panini, 1998). About the Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of Giants specifically, cfr. R. Piccinelli, *I Giganti: Palazzo Te* (Milan: Skira, 2020).

closer to reality can be obtained. Nonetheless, so-called “reality media” are not yet a “perfect” *mimesis* of the real.³

The relationship between the current immersive devices and the more dated optical instruments of the so-called pre-cinematographic phase has already been widely brought to light: it is the case of the scene of the eighteenth century⁴ and the stereoscope of the subsequent century⁵ that share, with the more recent immersive technologies, the question of a “channelled aesthetic perception.”⁶ In rather similar fashion, at the pictorial level, the *Quadraturismo* and the *trompe-l’œil* raise questions relating to both the continuity between the space of experience and the space represented, and to the methods of construction of a gaze “from the inside” in which proximity allows for the perception of esthesis, verdictives and passion.

Oliver Grau⁷ – the scholar who perhaps more than any other has outlined a genealogy of immersivity – has identified a possible origin even in Pompeian painting, to then look to the Renaissance and Baroque illusionist spaces, all the way down to the more recent scenarios

3 E. Modena, *Nelle storie: Arte, cinema e media immersivi* (Rome: Carocci, 2022); A. Pinotti, “VR, AR, MR, XR,” in *Enciclopedia dell’Arte Contemporanea*, vol. 4 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana “Giovanni Treccani,” 2021): 685-686.

4 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (2001), trans. G. Custance (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003).

5 J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1992).

6 P. Montani, *Tecnologie della sensibilità: Estetica e immaginazione interattiva* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2014): 25.

7 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, opens his reconnaissance on the Pompeian frescoes, where the creation of a pictorial surface with the simulation of depth generates the effect of an ambience of greater extension than what it is in reality, capturing the gaze of the observer who does not seem to perceive the actual distinction between real space and the space of the image. Grau then lists the subsequent examples: the *Chamber of the Deer* in the Avignon Palace of the Popes (1343); the *Hall of Perspectives* by Baldassare Peruzzi in villa Farnesina (1516), the neoclassical “village rooms” or “sylvans.” The latter is a kind that, “while it dilates to the extreme the portrait of landscape taking it to the dimensions of the environmental room, it applies at the same time scenic criteria relevant to organising the decorations unitarily, with the illusionist effect of the *plein air*,” R. Roli, *Pittura bolognese 1650-1800: Dal Cignani ai Gandolfi* (Bologna: Alfa Edizioni, 1977): 70 [my translation].

(panorama).⁸ Grau, however, does not refer specifically to the striking example of the Chamber of the Giants, where the immersivity reaches a very high level of passionate involvement on the part of the spectator, moreover without resorting to an auxiliary devices (as is the case today with headsets, overalls). A stunning illusionistic artifice defined by Frederick Hart as “surely the most fantastic and frightening creation of the entire Italian Renaissance in any medium”⁹ capable of catapulting the spectator into the heart of the event portrayed; as stated in 1934 by Ernst Gombrich: “into the deafening vortex of a frightening catastrophe,”¹⁰ capable of engendering astonishment and awe.¹¹

Harking back to the renowned words of Walter Benjamin: “the history of art is a history of prophecies” which “can only be written from the standpoint of the immediate, actual present,”¹² where “every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability.”¹³ It can be stated that the case we wish to investigate here can be considered in the light of a premise. In short, the machine frescoed in the Chamber of the Giants in Palazzo Te appears to be the height of an illusion that involves the spectator in a dimension that can be defined as being fully immersive.

Moreover, if we carefully observe, in the chamber in question of Palazzo Te, all the “instructions [...] which

8 In 1792 Robert Baker, in London, made the first Panorama, which consists in a circular shaped ambience, where on the interior walls are projected images of times of distant places, offering the chance to the spectators of having a travel experience whilst being “stationary.” Cfr., besides O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, also S. Bordini, *Storia del panorama: La visione totale della pittura nel XIX secolo* (Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2009); M. Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini: Letteratura e cultura visuale* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2012); M. Cometa, *Cultura visuale* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2021). E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 94, in 1934 had already related the Chamber of the Giants with the nineteenth century panoramas, stating: “that indeed Giulio, and he alone, was the first to try out in a work of art that which is called the hall of the Giants” [my translation].

9 F. Hart, *Giulio Romano*: 32.

10 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 79.

11 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021): 107-109, in the chapter dedicated to the environment-image states that the Chamber of the Giants is a paradigmatic example, “an illusionistic machine that invites one to reflect on the viewer’s visual act as a participative response to the iconic act.”

12 W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 1, no. 2:1046-7. Quoted in English in B. Doherty, “Between the Artwork and its ‘Actualization’: A Footnote to Art History in Benjamin’s *Work of Art*,” *Paragraph* 32, no. 3 (2009): 331-358, 336.

13 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1982), trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 462-463.

[in the planar paintings] direct the gaze, guide the reading, intimidate and can, at times, seduce the viewer subjecting them to the representation,”¹⁴ have been completely disavowed.¹⁵ They have been totally cancelled. And, not by chance, in their place some decidedly more cogent ones have been created in an interplay of different disciplines, taking one another by the hand, offering a wholly original reading of the Chamber in question that can fully manifest the active nature of perception.

An exceptional visitor

Let us now try to enter the Chamber of the Giants, highlighting its most salient characteristics. And we shall do so starting from an exceptional witness, Giorgio Vasari (Arezzo, 1511-1574), the art historian who was able to visit the Mantuan Palazzo Te on two occasions: the first time when the Chamber of the Giants was under construction; the second when the works had already been completed. His testimony can to all intents and purposes be considered an *ekphrasis* of great efficacy that “overlaps with the pictorial [story], and at times gives the impression of eclipsing it.”¹⁶ Here is the description Vasari gives of the space created and painted by Giulio Romano:

After laying deep, double foundations in that corner, which was in a swampy spot, Giulio had built over that angle a large, round room with extremely thick walls, so that the four corners of the outside walls would be stronger and could support a double vault rounded like an oven. And having done this, since the room had corners, he built here and there all the way around it the doors, windows, and a fireplace of rusticated stones with worn-away edges, which

14 G. Careri, “Prefazione,” in L. Marin, *Opacità della pittura: Sulla rappresentazione nel Quattrocento* (Florence: La Casa Usher, 2012): 7-13.

15 On the role of the frame in the work of art see D. Ferrari, A. Pinotti, eds., *La cornice: Storie, teorie, testi* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2018) and S. Zuliani, *Spazi e tempi dell’installazione* (Rome: Arshake, 2015).

16 A. Belluzzi, *Giulio Romano*: 446 [my translation]. On the text/image problem cfr. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

were disjointed and crooked almost to the extent that they even seemed to lean over on one side and actually to collapse.¹⁷

Giulio Romano – as can be inferred – gave a particular form to the environment: it is not a “round room,” as Vasari might lead us to believe, but a “a double vault rounded like an oven,” which did not have sharp corners and whose doors and windows were “disjointed and crooked,” which almost certainly means that the windows were closed by painted blinds and the doors were in continuity with respect to the frescoes.

A singular space, which also disposed of a particular flooring, as confirmed by Vasari himself:

He had made the floor with polished river slingstones that ran around the walls, and those on the painting plane, which fell downwards had counterfeited: for a part those painted inwards escaped, and at times were occupied and adorned by grass and at times by larger stones.¹⁸

But, as can well be imagined, it was, in those days, a cobbled floor with slingstones that, albeit creating seamless continuity with the upright walls, did not represent an assurance of a steady support for the visitor.¹⁹

It is not possible, however, to be outside the space to talk about it; you need to traverse it to know it, for

17 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 370. In the first edition by types of Lorenzo Torrentino (Florence, 1550), the historiographer was even more articulate: “He therefore had double foundations of great depth sunk at that corner, which was in a marshy place, and over that angle he constructed a large round room, with very thick walls, to the end that the four external corners of the masonry might be strong enough to be able to support a double vault, round after the manner of an oven. This done, he caused to be built at the corners right round the room, in the proper places, the doors, windows, and fireplace, all of rustic stones rough-hewn as if by chance, and, as it were, disjointed and awry, insomuch that they appeared to be really hanging over to one side and falling down.” G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano pittore e architetto,” in *Le vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (1550) (Turin: Einaudi, 1986): 833 [my translation].

18 Ibidem: 834 [my translation].

19 The flooring was made anew by Paolo Pozzo in the eighteenth-century restoration of the palazzo, in which very likely the fireplace of which Vasari speaks was bricked up, and which is testified to in some drawings preserved at the Louvre, Windsor and Palazzo Te (donated in 2015 by Monroe Warshaw), cfr. R. Piccinelli, *I Giganti*: 27. Furthermore, in 1781, the archduke Ferdinand of Habsburg commissioned Giovanni Bottani to “have made a picket fence in the hall of the Giants [...]. Also, he would promptly have the fireplace sealed and walled up,” citation reported in A. Belluzzi, *Giulio Romano*: 236.

it to become a true object of analysis. The analysts must become an integral part of the space, immerse themselves in it like a percipient body, like the users of the place, going through it and letting themselves be guided by the logic imposed by the context in which they find themselves. The visitors are, so to speak, literally “manipulated” by this unusual spatial environment.

The system of the spatial expression is in itself meaningful, that here acquires an even more complete meaning with what is portrayed on the walls: the significance of the space is “the final result of a stratified and complex series of procedures, articulations and sub-articulations, where an element is meaningful only if related to the others.”²⁰

The spatial configurations prefigure, that is, the virtuality, of the possible ways of using the morphology itself of the places. In this sense, a semiotic reading can come to our aid which – as Giannitrapani writes – “considers space not as a straightforward container of subjects, objects, events, but as a meaningful structure capable of speaking of a multiplicity of aspects of life.”²¹ This means that: “The significance of the space lies in the efficacious action that it provokes on the subjects coming into contact with it.” And in order for space to completely “influence the body it must work on the ambience, it must give a shape to the architecture of the space.”²²

The Fall of the Giants

There is no doubt that the space of the Chambers of the Giants, already in itself significant, finds fulfillment with what it portrayed on the ceiling and on the walls. Although this interest of this analysis is focused on the immersive dimension, it is necessary to briefly go over the

20 G. Marrone, “Efficacia simbolica dello spazio: Azioni e passioni,” in P. Bertetti, G. Manetti, eds., *Forme della testualità: Teoria, modelli, storia e prospettive* (Turin: Testo&immagine, 2001): 85-96.

21 A. Giannitrapani, *Introduzione alla semiotica dello spazio* (Rome: Carrocci, 2013): 45.

22 On the space cfr. also M. Hammad, *Lire l'espace, comprendre l'architecture* (Limoges: Presses Universitaires, 2001), trans. G. Festi (Rome: Meltemi, 2003).

iconography of the whole figurative apparatus because— as we shall see – it is closely related to Federico II Gonzaga, the patron, and Charles V over whose empire the sun never set. The whole room, as is well-known, portrays the fall of the Giants drawn from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.²³ The myth tells of the giants’ attempted attack on the gods: with the intent to reach Mount Olympus, the vicious inhabitants of the earth superimpose one another on two mountains, that of Pelion and that of Ossa.

Portrayed on the ceiling (Fig. 1) is the gods’ ire against the giants’ attempt to scale the mountains, with Jupiter who abandons his throne to place himself alongside Juno, who, with her gaze and index finger, points to the direction towards which to cast the thunderbolts. The plot hatched by the giants fails, of course, and Jupiter’s intervention makes the mountains collapse; by tumbling precipitously, they overwhelm the giants burying them beneath the heavy boulders. A daring view from the bottom upwards, always on the ceiling, portrays a circular temple with twelve columns from whose balustrade some characters, concerned and awestruck by what is happening beneath them, look out; in the same way the numerous other divinities display impassioned states of agitation. The throne, left vacant by Jupiter, is occupied by the imperial eagle with its wings outspread, while the menacing clouds surround the whole empyrean in a role of transition from the world of the gods to the terrestrial terrain of the common mortals.

On the walls, above the fireplace, the giant Typhon (monstruous son of Gaia – Fig. 2) is depicted: for having tried to depose Jupiter, he is struck by lightning and sinks under Etna, and here, crushed by the boulders, in an attempt to defend himself he spews fire and lapilli causing an earthquake.²⁴ The fireplace, in turn, was supposed to suggest the illusion of the youth condemned by the flames: the flames that issue from the mouth of the giant Typhon,

23 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I vv. 151-154 (l. A.D.), trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 5.

24 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* V: 109.



Fig. 1. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants*, ceiling, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

in the pictorial fiction, thus ended up “conversing” with the real fire of the fireplace.

Examining more closely the remaining frescoed parts, Vasari took note of further details:

the entire world is upside-down and almost at its final end [...] many giants can be seen in flight, all struck down by Jove’s thunderbolts and on the verge of being overwhelmed by the landslides from the mountains just like the others. In another part, Giulio represented other giants upon whom are crashing down temples, columns, and other parts of buildings, creating among these arrogant creatures great havoc and loss of life.²⁵

And, in actual fact, three walls propose landscapes (Figg. 3-4) and another one proposes an architecture – a *serliana* – that too about to collapse under the fire of the lightning bolts of the gods (Fig. 5).

²⁵ G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 372.



Fig. 2. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants*, wall est, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Fig. 3. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants*, wall sud, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Fig. 4. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants*, wall ovest, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Fig. 5. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/Chamber of the Giants*, wall nord, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

At this point it is worthwhile turning our attention to the time when the action portrayed takes place. The time in itself is not representable, it is represented by means of movement and transformation: it is a function of the movement and the last is a function of space. Any action, which is never a perpetual motion, contains phases: a beginning, a climax and an end. In the course of each one of those, every action leads to the memory of what had come before and what will come afterwards. In short, the climax is the moment of utmost tension. In the Chamber of the Giants it corresponds to the phase when everything collapses: the technique is that of breaking down natural and architectural elements into parts that gradually lose their natural order to follow one that has gone completely haywire. If it is true that the rendering of the fatal moment is accentuated in mannerism, it can be said that here it has touched some very elevated heights.

The particularity of the fatal instant had been highlighted, once again, by Vasari (Fig. 6):



Fig. 6. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber of the Giants*, detail of the Giant, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.

Giulio [...] made plans to build a corner-room [...] in which the walls would correspond with the paintings, in order to deceive the people who would see it as much as he could.²⁶

a marvellous work where

the entire painting has neither beginning nor end, and that it is all tied together and runs on continuously without boundary or decoration.²⁷

This is a room completely without frames,²⁸ of any delimitation, with an enveloping continuity, in which the space – as Gombrich points out –

runs homogeneous to the floor as far as the apex of the roof with not edges and no frame to interrupt the seamlessness of the surfaces, it is completely transformed into a pictorial scene: it is part of a single action, animated by the same emotional impetus.²⁹

But, Vasari adds, it is a horrible scene:

Therefore, let no one ever imagine seeing a work from the brush that is more horrible or frightening or more realistic than this one. And anyone who enters that room and sees the windows, doors, and other such details all distorted and almost on the verge of crashing down, as well as the mountains and buildings collapsing, can only fear that everything is toppling down upon him. Especially when he sees all the gods in that heaven running this way and that in flight.³⁰

In short, a stunning illusionistic artifice that seeks to catapult the viewer into the throbbing heart of the event in progress, where “the boundaries of space

26 Ibid.: 370.

27 Ibid.: 373.

28 Cfr. P. Carabell, “Breaking the Frame: Transgression and Transformation in Giulio Romano’s Sala dei Giganti,” *Artibus et Historiae* 18, no. 36 (1997): 87-100.

29 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 81.

30 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 372-373.

disappear [...] and the laws of statics, in which the eye can find tranquillizing points of reference, are completely lacking.”³¹ Inside the environment: “the walls themselves move and, soon, everything is disarranged and collapses upon the viewer” who, in this way, shares “the same fate that submits and destroys the very powerful giants that tried in vain to sustain the walls.”³² (Figg. 7-8)



Fig. 7. G. Romano, *Camera dei Giganti/ Chamber of the Giants*, detail of the Giant, 1532-1536, Mantua, Palazzo Te.



Fig. 8. G. Romano, copy of, *Disegno della parete con il camino*, Paris, Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, inv. 3636, recto

31 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 79.

32 Ibid.

Being at the end of the world

At this point – and to delve once more into the immersivity that generates the environment – it comes natural to wonder why the patron, duke Federico II Gonzaga, decided to make such a particular and unique ambience in what is considered to be his villa of pleasures. What role would the Chamber of the Giants play in that precise historical moment?³³ We should not try to imagine the visitor guided by the Lord of Mantua in the palazzo: Federico II leads his guest in a space whose boundaries are well defined, through ambiances of different sizes, decorated with specific iconographic themes, in a crescendo that takes him gradually as far as the Chamber of the Giants. An initiatory pathway through which the duke proposes to his guest a sort of progressive estrangement with respect to the real world and that reaches its climax in the immense “catastrophe” of the dark cave, with the doors and windows shut and only the flickering light coming from the lit fireplace. A status of anguish and terror, apparently with no exit, in which the guest “with the highest mastery is deprived of every chance to take a distance, to evaluate the actual spaces.”³⁴ In this regard, Ernst Gombrich’s personal experience seems truly exemplary:

The kind of oppression that we have experienced is absolutely new and the sentiment from which it is born and which Giulio has been able to give shape to, is that of anguish. [...] There, we have experienced directly and in an absolutely new way the anguished nightmare of our involvement in an ineluctable catastrophe.³⁵

33 The Duke of Mantua invested colossal amounts and a special interest in the project for Palazzo Te: a work that had no residential function, which was not a fortress and in which even a room, that of the Giants, was in no way inhabitable.

34 E. Gombrich, *Giulio Romano*: 81 [my traslation].

35 Ibid.: 111 [my translation].

Who is behind the enormous cave remains, therefore, captured by the representation, perceiving step by step that everything is being twisted, being destroyed: in the room lit up only by the fire burning in the fireplace, the visitor “experiences” the end of the world just as it is taking place, he experiences the torment – as Vasari writes – “that everything [...] is toppling down upon him.”³⁶

It is important to understand what happens to the viewer’s body and how the space substantiated in the representation is capable of triggering sensorial perceptions. As seems obvious, one’s eyesight is the first sense brought into play, and not only because the visitor’s eye is engaged by the enormous eyes of the Giants, but rather by the particular luminosity of the environment: indeed, one’s eyes must adapt to the light conditions produced by the fire in the fireplace; entering the ambience from conditions of full light, the adaptation to the poor light comes about slowly, one’s pupils must dilate as much as possible to be able to embrace the vision. The fireplace fire, moreover, is also responsible for the arousal of other senses: the sense of smell, because the burning wood diffuses its smell in all of the room; the sense of hearing, owing to the crackling and the rustling of the burning wood; the sense of touch, in that the fire warms up the ambience and consequently the visitor. Even the flooring can fall within the tactile sensoriality – in “small, round stones,” but “set in with a knife” –³⁷ which make the visitor’s movements unstable, reinforcing the precipice effect that is the central theme of the ambience.

Amongst those who in the course of time have had the chance to live a sensorial experience inside the Chamber of the Giants we can also name a scientist like Ulisse Aldrovandi (Bologna, 1522-1605): his interest, in particular, is addressed to the sonorous refraction of the ambience on the basis of which a word whispered in one

36 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano,” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 372.

37 G. Vasari, “Giulio Romano:” 373.

corner is perfectly heard in the opposite corner.³⁸ Ultimately, the tremulous, mobile and never total illumination produced by the flames in the fireplace, the sonority itself of the fire, the amplified voice, the insecurity that the visitor experiences owing to the “stones set in edge” of the flooring, are all aspects that confer a powerful dynamicity to the whole, generating what can be defined a proto-cinematographic effect or, paradoxically, a distressing *trompe-l’œil* that at length deceives the feelings of the viewer.³⁹

In practice, what did this exceptional spatial and sensorial machine which acts with such terrifying efficacy on the viewer try to convey? Undoubtedly, the iconographic subject was not chosen by chance; in fact, the mythological fable is accompanied by an interpretative tradition of a moral sort: the *Gigantomachia* is an example of chastised pride, with Jupiter who performs an act of supremacy to restore justice. And in Mantua, in the early Cinquecento, the imperial ideology resorted to the fall of the Giants to celebrate the victories of Charles V against the infidels; Jupiter thus prefigures Charles V who, in the guise of Jupiter, leads to the demise of the Italian princes who rebelled against his sovereignty.⁴⁰ Alongside this reading of international politics, however, another one of a purely local sort gains headway: “Jupiter would be the ambitious Federico who, amongst other things, chooses to insert in the family coat of arms precisely the feat of Mount Olympus.”⁴¹ Whoever enters the Chamber of the Giants, in short, is put in contact with the ineluctability of the sovereignty of the gods against the “bestiality” of the

38 D.A. Franchini, C. Tellini Perina, A. Zanca, R. Margonari, G. Olmi, R. Signorini, *La scienza a corte: Collezionismo eclettico, natura e immagine a Mantova fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979): 192-194. The manuscript is cited (136, XXI, cc. 27v-29v), preserved in the University Library of Bologna in which Aldrovandi tells of his journeys to Mantua and, in particular, to the Chamber of the Giants.

39 S.A. Hickson, “More than meets the eye: Giulio Romano, Federico II Gonzaga, and the triumph of *trompe-l’œil* at the Palazzo Te in Mantua,” in L. A. Boldt-Irons, C. Federici, E. Virgulti, eds., *Disguise, Deception, Trompe-l’œil: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009): 41-59.

40 For a more detailed argumentation cfr. D. Sogliani, M. Grosso, eds., *L'imperatore e il duca: Carlo V a Mantova* (Milan: Skira, 2023). The exhibition offers a reflection on the cultural meaning of Europe starting from the figure of Charles V and his alliances with the Italian courts, narrating the emperor's arrival in Mantua in 1530, feted by grand celebrations that Federico II Gonzaga organised in the halls of Palazzo Te under the masterful direction of Giulio Romano.

41 R. Piccinelli, *I Giganti*: 19.

Giants. A clear message addressed to recalling the correct moral and political behaviour to engage in vis-à-vis those who hold power.

By way of conclusion

As will have become apparent by now, the Chamber of the Giants avails itself of a perceptive setting foreshadowing what, almost five centuries later, finds a renewed materialisation in the most advanced technologies of construction of the images that see, in the progressive cancellation of the aesthetic threshold and the disappearance of the “frontier” between the world of representation and that of reality, their final point of arrival. The ambience-images that emerge are capable of generating an effect of reality so immanent that whoever perceives them has the feeling of being part of that fictitious world. And the spectators, wearing a visor “that blinds them with respect to the physical reality that surrounds them,”⁴² isolate themselves completely from the real world. But if – as Elisabetta Modena writes – “the immersion occurs [...] mostly according to a process of environmental reduction: the format of the experiences is central, [as is] that entanglement that is created between the image world and the *experiencer* who, in becoming a part of it, experiences what [...] happens in history.”⁴³

The spatial-pictorial construction of the Chamber of the Giants, without a frame, with interruptions, must in short be considered – as noted by Andrea Pinotti – the perfect example *ante litteram* that “it is certainly not necessary to await contemporaneity to witness the advent of an immersive and enveloping space.”⁴⁴ This does not prevent us from testing the new immersive technologies to try to

42 E. Modena, *Nelle storie*: 145. Cfr. also E. Modena “Immersi nel reale: Prospettive an-
iconiche sull’arte contemporanea dall’ambiente alla realtà virtuale,” *Carte Semiotiche. Rivista
internazionale di semiotica e teoria dell’immagine*, L. Corrain, M. Vannoni, eds., *Annali 7,
Figure dell’immersività* (2021): 71-78.

43 *Ibid.*: 146.

44 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell’immagine*: 109.

‘simulate’ in every part the original ambience,⁴⁵ proposing, through virtual reality, what can no longer be perceived in situ today. By introducing, from the top of the chimney stack, the photons into the hearth and making use of high definition orthophotographs of the walls and the ceiling, we virtually recreate the flickering light of the flames, as well as the sensorial effect of the heat as they must have been perceived in the original Chamber of the Giants. Ultimately, if Giulio Romano was a full-fledged forerunner of immersive environments, then the new technologies can represent a further aid to fully restoring the original perception of the Chamber of the Giants, leading us back to the ingenious “invention” that the artist had made for his cultured and refined patron. With an apt reference, through the anticlassical taste for the outlandish and for contamination, to that Mannerism that – in the vulgate of Giorgio Vasari – must contain “an abundance of beautiful costumes, variety in imaginative details, charm in their colours, diversity in their buildings, and distance and variety in their landscapes;” in short, “a copious invention in every particular.”⁴⁶

45 The bibliography on immersivity in the contemporary is vast: M. A. Moser, D. MacLeod, eds., *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996); W. Wolf, W. Bernhart, A. Mahler, eds., *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2013); R. Pinto, “La mostra come esperienza immersive: Damien Hirst – Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable,” in C.G. Morandi, C. Sinigaglia, eds., *L’esperienza dello spazio: Collezioni, mostre, musei*, (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2020): 324-334; J. Voorhies, J. Postsensual, *Aesthetics: On the Logic of the Curatorial* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003). Cfr. also P. Conte, *Unframing Aesthetics* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2020) and the recent J. Bodin, A. De Cesaris, eds., “Immersivity: Philosophical Perspectives on Technologically Mediated Experience,” *Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age* 10, no. 20 (2022).

46 G. Vasari, “Preface to Part Three” in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. J.C. Bondanella, P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 278.

Allegories of Immersion



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Abstract

Fish Night, an episode of *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS* (S01E12, 2019) based on a 1982 short story by Joe R. Lansdale, can be interpreted as an allegory of the impossibility of immersive experience: if real, it is deadly, because the images are no longer such or ghosts but living beings present in a shared environmental habitat, acting with but also against the subject, in turn no longer a spectator. Comparing the story and film, and ancient ekphrastic literature, I discuss, in a trans-medial imaginary genealogical perspective, the symptoms of this cultural *topos* and of the regressive desire for immersion and for transparent immediacy that shapes and drives it, dwelling in particular on the ambivalent phenomenological and ontological relations between living bodies, pictures and media as deep time-bending.

Keywords [Allegory](#) [Ekphrastic fear](#) [Media imaginary](#)
[Materiality](#) [Elemental media](#)

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A premise

Fish Night is the twelfth episode of the first season of *LOVE DEATH + ROBOTS*, an animated Netflix series created by Tim Miller and David Fincher and broadcast on 15 March 2019.¹ Directed by Damian Nenow, with Gabriele Pennacchioli as supervising director and Rafał Wojtunik as art director, it was produced by Platine Image studio,² based on 1982 short story by Joe R. Lansdale, in an adaptation by Philip Gelat and Miller.

I see *Fish Night* as an allegory of the impossibility of virtual immersion. Obviously, it regards coexistence and interaction in a shared environment by a subject in motion, one no longer merely observing moving images at a remove, and images which are no longer concrete pictures or simulacrum but, to full effect, real living and acting beings. Why would such an experience be impossible? In answering, I will focus on elements drawn from both the literary account and the animated film, seen as trans-medial symptoms of underlying issues which regard the nature of bodies, images, technology, of the medium, and their various interrelations with respect to the fictional immersion and virtual immersivity. I shall cross-analyse the animated short film and its narrative hypotext with another classic literary text which describes what, in many respects, is a complementary immersion.

This approach allows me to simultaneously address: 1) the “quest for immersion” uncovered by Huhtamo’s media archaeology as a constant motif in the reprise and recurrence of narratives and patterns both in media history and, from my point of view, in the trans-medial story of *Fish Night*, which is about ghosts, repetitions and reappearances that ultimately affect the media themselves (the spectator’s body, the images, the car, the landscape, as we

1 <https://lovedeathandrobots.tilda.ws/index>, accessed September 1, 2023.

2 <https://platige.com/project/feature/fish-night/>, accessed September 1, 2023.

will soon discover);³ 2) the “[cultural] desire for transparent immediacy” through visual representation found in the genealogy of Bolter and Grusin;⁴ 3) “the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually,” diagnosed by W.J.T. Mitchell as alert for the literary description showing through words and rhetorical tropes a strongly vivid impression of a visual stimulus, object or scene, in summa as “ekphrasis fear;”⁵ 4) Paul de Man’s allegory⁶ of “potential confusion between figural and referential statement,” between the image and the real.

Of course, the four points just evoked should not to be confused. Quite the contrary, aware of their differences in approach, object and aim, I use them as access points to the question of immersivity as tropism and symptom of a desire and anxiety manifested and treated differently in the literary texts and their media adaptations that I am about to discuss. In the textual and audio-visual issues I have chosen, or, as Foucault might say,⁷ in the “myriad events through which – thanks to which, against which –” “the unique aspect” of the cultural idea and *topos* of the experience of immersion-immersivity has arisen, I

3 E. Huhtamo, “Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion,” in S. Penny, ed., *Critical Issues in Electronic Media* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995): 160-161, and “Dismantling the Fairy Engine. Media Archaeology as Topos Study,” in E. Huhtamo, J. Parikka, eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011): 27-47.

4 J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998): 23ff.

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” in Id., *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 154. See R.P. Fletcher, “Digital Ekphrasis and the Uncanny: Toward a Poetics of Augmented Reality,” *Electropoetics* 3, no. 15 (2017) http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/eng_facpub/56

6 P. de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1979): 113.

7 M. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1977): 147.

shall detect the symptom of its impossibility and sketch its singular trans-medial archaeology⁸ and imaginary.

The *topos* points to a yearning for fictional immersion, a performative moment in which saying something brings it into being, making it real in every sense, and fully adherent to the referent, with language and synesthetic perception becoming one. Introduced by a terrified alarm, a seductive invitation or the command of “look!,” the very essential wish is to make subject, image and thing coincide. The intensive alteration of the corporeal identity and peripersonal space that results involves not only the character described, narrated and represented in the act of a self-denying vision that resists classification as merely an ocular, remote beholding, but also the reader and spectator drawn into an embodied simulation of the occurrences and fantasies found in the images, both verbal and visual.

***Fish Night*, a never-ending trans-medial story**

I shall intertwine a summary and a commentary of Lansdale’s short story with that of the episode of *LD+R*. In this way, I will point out some differences and sources of their imaginaries, and make some interlinear remarks on both the literary text and the television adaptation, in order to highlight the main theme of this defined trans-medial corpus: the impossibility of immersion-immersiveness.

Two salesmen, one young, the other older, get stuck in the desert when their car breaks down. The hours pass and night falls. At first, the older man bemoans how door-to-door sales are a thing of the past. Then he remembers that twenty years earlier he was in this same desolate landscape, travelling an asphalted road amidst power stanchions and the Rocky Mountains, between Arizona and New Mexico. “There are memories of mine out here,”

8 T. Elsaesser, “Media Archaeology as Symptom,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2, no. 14 (2016): 181-215.

he says, “and they’re visiting me again.”⁹ In the short story, this is an unmistakable evocation of *Death of a Salesman*, the Arthur Miller play directed by Elia Kazan, winner of the 1949 Pulitzer Prize and adapted on numerous occasions for film and TV, in which past and present collapse into the remembrance of the lead character, Willy Lowman, the disillusioned, exhausted door-to-door salesman who, at over sixty, struggles with a trauma not just personal, but historical and collective.¹⁰ In *Fish Night*, the instant replay of involuntary subjective memory gives way to a re-enactment both psychic and geological, a *Nachleben*, a survival and an afterlife of a story that is more than just human. The desert through which the highway passes will once again be a “petrified primal landscape,” allegorically manifesting itself as a “Hippocratic face of history.”¹¹

Lansdale describes the landscape as an immersive – and devouring – space:

It’s fish night, boy. Tonight’s the full moon and this is the right part of the desert if memory serves me, and the feel is right — I mean, doesn’t the night feel like it’s made up of some fabric, that it’s different from other nights, that it’s like being inside a big dark bag, the sides sprinkled with glitter, a spotlight at the top, at the open mouth, to serve as a moon?

The function of the mouth metaphor in the Lansdale’s writing is complex, but here it foreshadows the finale’s explicit immersive embodiment: does one enter an immersive space or get swallowed up by it? Space, we can say with Bataille, “can become one fish that swallows another.”¹² Is immersion-immersivity an experience of “by”

9 J.R. Lansdale, *Fish Night* (1982), in G. Brown, A.J. Spedding, eds., *Love Death + Robots: The Official Anthology: Volume One* (Bendigo: Cohesion Press, 2021): 193-200. Pages not numbered; all citations in the text.

10 J. Schlueter, “Re-membling Willy’s Past: Introducing Postmodern Concerns through *Death of a Salesman*,” in M. Roudané, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Miller’s Death of a Salesman* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995): 142-154.

11 W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedmann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Mein: Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 1: 343, trans. H. Eiland (Cambridge MA-London: Harvard University Press, 2019): 174.

12 G. Bataille, “Espace” (1930), *Documents*, no. 1, anastatic reprint, ed. D. Hollier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991): 41.

or “*in*”? Is it penetration or impregnation? Transparency or opacity? Immateriality or the materiality of the environmental medium?

In Lansdale’s short story, evoking the past, the older man brings up Native Americans, the Navajos and the Hopi, and Manitou, the Great Living Spirit “still around” in everything and every being. He read in a science book – he goes on – that the desert was once a sea filled with fish and “fantastical creatures,” maybe even man’s birthplace. “The world’s an old place, and for longtime is nothing but sea,” he concludes pensively. And – dwelling on the thought – those beings may haunt this place the way human ghosts haunt their former homes.

With these musings, the younger and the older man fall asleep in the Plymouth station wagon. Whether dreamed or real, lights from outside the car cause the older man’s eyes to open. Facing him, close to the car window, is an enormous eye. Octopuses, giant jellyfish, molluscs and fish from way back in evolution – Coelacanths, Nautilus, Limulus, marine fauna in existence prior to the great Cambrian extinction, appear in the surrounding environment, where the men, now outside the car, can magically breath. Strange beings, “like nothing [they have] ever seen pictures of or imagined,” are present but almost incorporeal, “ghosts of older world,” disincarnate *eidola* that pass through the men’s bodies, though they still feel and sense them. But “*what*” does a man’s body feel when another body passes through it? Symptomatic of the ambivalence and ambiguity of the immersion-immersivity *topos*, and its impossibility, Philip Gelat leaves this phrase out of the adaptation of Lansdale’s short story for *LD+R*:

“Feel it, boy? Feel the presence of the sea? Doesn’t it feel like the beating of your own mother’s heart while you float inside the womb?”

And the younger man had to admit that he felt it, that inner rolling rhythm that is the tide of life and the pulsating heart of the sea.

Thus the “oceanic sentiment,” the “thalassic regression” debated by psychoanalysis,¹³ also characteristic of the “crisis of presence” in magical experiences discussed by anthropology,¹⁴ are pathic and phenomenological equivalents of the sea’s “presence” as a primary medium, a pre-individual fusion and condition for the possibility of life. In this elemental medium, the bodies of the marine beings are, first and foremost, traversable and diaphanous, immaterial media-mediators permitting an equally immaterial engagement. They are “spectral,” like “soap bubbles,” “smoke,” “flashes of light,” flitting and skirting, writes Lansdale. There is no mistaking the kinship with intermedial *ex-empla* of the metaphorical repertoire of philosophies, both ancient and modern, of visual perception, Renaissance and eighteenth-century treatises on painting, plus contemporary theories of optical devices and electric media.

In the *LD+R* episode, the ecstatic young man shouts, “I wanna swim!,” as if he were a man-fish of folk legend brought to life.¹⁵ Deaf to the alarmed pleas of the older man, he joins the school of fish, swimming amongst them in slow-motion,¹⁶ becoming like them. Stripped of his individuality, he is transfigured, weightlessly transported upward, only to have his ascension end in death. All the other creatures flee in fright at the approach of an enormous red megalodon, which, circling the car, devours the slower, defenceless swimmer, meaning the human transformed into

13 On this essential topic of the symbolic return to the sea, I can only point to Ferenczi, Freud, Alexander and Kerényi, or Sloterdijk, plus the *Mutterleibversenkung* of Eĵzenštejn or slow-motion, in the case of Epstein. See W.B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

14 E. de Martino, *Il mondo magico: Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo* (1945) (Turin: Boringhieri, 1973): 144-145, and *Magic: A Theory from the South* (1959), trans. D.L. Zinn (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015): 85-96.

15 B. Croce, *Storie e leggende napoletane* (1919) (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1967): 306-313. See G.B. Bronzini, “Cola Pesce il tuffatore: dalla leggenda moderna al mito antico,” *Lares* 66, no. 3 (2000): 341-376.

16 Under the slow-motion effect, our bodies look like “smooth muscles moving through a dense medium in which thick currents always carry and shape this clear descendent of old marine fauna and maternal waters.” J. Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine* (1946), trans. C. Wall-Romana (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014): 29.

a marine being. The Otus megalodon, which first lived at the start of the Miocene period, succumbing to extinction roughly 2.5 million years ago, has returned to the desert between Arizona and New Mexico, only to slowly disappear from view, leaving behind plumes of blood set against the enormous, white, imperturbable moon. Left by himself, the older man is stunned by what he has just seen.

From New Mexico to Greece, and back

In *Fish Night*, the impossibility of immersive experience, i.e. of the elimination of all substantial differences between the gaze, the images and the environment, is tied to the fact that, were it to become real, death would result. Given the trans-medial imaginary genealogical perspective indicated in the Premise, I read the lethal outcome of the way up of the main character of *Fish Night* as complementary to the dark plunge down described in a masterful scene from the *Eikones*, the influential classic of ekphrastic literature and ancient rhetoric attributed to Philostratus the Elder. Reactivating the Ancient Greek, I would then speak of *anabasis* (from *ana-*, “up,” and *baínō*, “to go”), of a fatal immersive ascent, for *Fish Night*, and of *catabasis* (from *kata-*, “down,” and *baínō*, “to go”), of a descent down in the underworld, for the *Eikones*.

Actually, the very protagonist of the episode from the *Eikones* is the penetrating gaze of a lookout scanning the sea, who, perched atop a pole on the shore, can spot tuna in the sea and call out them to fishermen. This fictional vision is enhanced by the pole, depicted as a *sublime lignum* in Negri’s sixteenth-century Latin translation, which acts as a technical mean and as rudimental prosthetic medium, allowing for a more powerful and detailed gaze. Still, the outcome is ultimately catastrophic: for as the lookout’s gaze gradually immerses itself in the maelstrom of moving forms and flashing colours, it becomes less penetrating, feebler, until the fish, barely discernible as shadows, swallow it up, as in the journey of Ulysses to Hades painted by Polignoto and described by Pausania.

In *Fish Night* as well, the immersive moment in which the verbal, the visual and the real all become performatively one, heralded by the ecstatic, ostentatious exhortation to look,¹⁷ winds up being the exact opposite: blindness and terror. And so it becomes an allegory of its own impossibility.

As Philostratus writes:

Now look at the painting and you will see just this going on. The look-out gazes at the sea and turns his eyes in one direction and another to get the number; and in the bright gleam of the sea the colours of the fish vary, those near the surface seem to be black, those just below are not so black, those lower still begin to elude the sense of sight, then they seem shadowy, and finally they look just like the water; for as the vision penetrates deeper and deeper its power of discerning objects in the water is blunted.¹⁸

In the story *Fish Night*, and even more so in the animated film, what occurs is not simply a metaphorical inversion of the yearning, for immersion and transparency. The change that takes place is literally ontological, rather than phenomenological: the inexorable law of the impenetrability of bodies in space has been restored, having earlier been suspended by the diaphanously spectral, almost immaterial state of the environmental medium. This elementary law of physics once again holds, even in the immersive environment, where the body of the human being has lost some of its species-specific characteristics – gravity, use of the respiratory apparatus and motor skills – while that of the image, finally possessed of a physical consistency of its own, has also gained new properties, enabling it to take actions that truly affect the other entities sharing the surrounding environment.

17 N. Bryson, "Philostratus and the Imaginary Museum," in S. Goldhill, R. Osborne, eds., *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 266-267.

18 Philostratus the Younger, *Imagines*. Callistratus, *Descriptions*, trans. A. Fairbanks (Cambridge MA: Harvard University, 1936): 57 (I.12); Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W.H.S. Jones, H.A. Ormerod (Cambridge MA: Harvard University, 1918): 185 (10.28.1).

Which medium?

But in the final analysis, what does *Fish Night* tell us about the material nature of the immersive medium and its uniqueness compared to other media and technical devices?

In Lansdale's short story, the protagonist of the deadly immersive experience is the older man, not the younger one, as in the *LD+R* episode. Lansdale has in mind the imagery of *Death of a Salesman* and Willy Lowman's irretrievable historical crisis. Charley, Willy's well-off neighbour, observes that: "A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."¹⁹ Thus the American Dream is a territorialised rendering of the countryside by the moving automobile, a "hot," prosthetic medium which is culturally, socially and aesthetically expansive, as Marshall McLuhan was to point out soon after, in short an "excrement of a kinetic ego" and an agent of the "motorized narcissism."²⁰ The automobile stands as the technological condition that makes possible the conquest of the last frontier, as the material and historical a-priori of the aesthetic experience of the wilderness, be it rebellious or liberating, ostentatious or touristic, with the complementary evolution of the car being its domestication to transport and distribute tangible and intangible goods. At the turn of the 60's-70's,²¹ road movies were both reflections and wellsprings of the cultural and mythopoetic *topos* of the automobile as a means to attaining individual freedom or reification, or to crafting the iconography of the American sublime. Indeed, the choice of a Plymouth Fury for the *LD+R* episode may not have

19 A. Miller, *Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* (1949) (London: Penguin, 1998): 111.

20 M. McLuhan, *Motorcar: The Mechanical Bride* (1951), in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) (Cambridge MA-London: MIT Press, 1994): 217-222. See P. Sloterdijk, "Die Herrschaft der Kentauren. Philosophische Bemerkungen zur Automobilität" (1992), trans. K. Ritson, *Transfers* 1, vol. 1 (2011): 14-24; P. Weibel, "Medien der Mobilität," in P. Weibel, ed., *CAR CULTURE: Medien der Mobilität* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2011): 345-400.

21 S. Cohan, I.R. Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London-New York: Routledge, 1997); A. Cross, "Driving the American Landscape," in P. Wollen, J. Kerr, eds., *Autopia: Cars and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002): 249-258; D. Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); D. Orgeron, *Road Movies: From Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

been random, given that the model was produced between 1968 and 1972, or precisely the years of the psychedelic and hippy culture, as well as the first signs of its impending crisis.

Anyway, the automobile is the technological embodiment of the desire of immersion, a new medium for an old movement and a very ancient desire, as shown to us by the sinking gaze in the sea described by Philostratus. A 1939 advertisement placed in *National Geographic* introduced General Motors' new Oldsmobile model with this slogan: "See America from an 'OBSERVATION BODY!'" The brief promotional text promised a "VISION as wide as all outdoors is yours...", but at the same time a "rhythmic ride" of a "rolling uterus"²² corresponding to the rhythm of the all-enveloping medium of the sea in which the body of the character from *Fish Night* loses himself in symbiotic fashion. Immersion means, at one and the same time, travelling "in" the landscape, being "part of" the environment, and returning "to" the maternal space. As was recently noted by Ruggero Eugeni,²³ the automobile is a medium-prosthesis which implements a protected, horizontal immersion scaled to human height, so to speak, and the line of the horizon, for drivers traversing urban and exurban landscapes in a personal travelling cave: a feeling of immersion intensified by the setting up of specific sensorial and perceptive processes (both hetero- and proprioceptive).

From this perspective, the regressive desire of immersivity of Lansdale's account stands in contrast to the prosthetic mode of technological immersivity which, according to McLuhan, is embodied by the automobile, and to the mythical example of fictional immersion made possible by the tuna lookout's perch described by Philostratus. In *Fish Night*, the two characters leave the car, technology's outpost for providing the senses with prosthesis and prophylaxis, and for supplying techniques of the

22 P. Sloterdijk, "Rollender Uterus" (1995), in *Selected Exaggerations: Conversations and Interviews, 1993-2012*, trans. K. Margolis (Cambridge: Polity Book, 2016): 24.

23 R. Eugeni, "La sposa algoritmica: L'automobile come medium e la navigazione del quotidiano," in F. Cavaletti, F. Fimiani, B. Grespi, A.C. Sabatino, eds., *Immersioni quotidiane: Vita ordinaria, cultura visuale e nuovi media* (Milan: Meltemi, 2023): 271-282.

sensitivity for the body and the gaze. Actually, they leave the scopic regimen of spectatorship, and the technological anti-environment created by the window's protective shield, coming into synesthetic contact with the natural environment's forms of life.

Another element in Lansdale's short story illustrates, as a symptom, this detachment from technology. Possibly as a paraphrase of one of McLuhan's *topoi*,²⁴ Lansdale likens the car to the older man's false teeth. Both are "trappings of civilization" which weigh down, serving as technological prostheses that are mobile and tied to mobility. They are metaphors: means of transport between inside and outside, as well as tools for aggression and conquering space and time.

"This isn't my world. I'm of that world. I want to float free in the belly of the sea, away from can openers and cars and –" [...] "I want to leave here! [...] The teeth! [...] It's the teeth. Dentist, science, fool!" He punched a hand into his mouth, plucked the teeth free, tossed them over his shoulder. Even as the teeth fell the old man rose. He began to stroke. To swim up and up and up, moving like a pale pink seal among the fish.

In the light of the moon the young man could see the pooched jaws of the old man, holding the last of the future's air. Up went the old man, up, up, up, swimming strong in the long-lost waters of a time gone by.

Even before technological and human-focused media as cars or false teeth, water is therefore the oldest medium, just as land and air – "The air trembled like a mass of gelatinous ectoplasm," begins the Lansdale's short story.²⁵ Water is an elemental, environing medium with its

24 M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*: 57, 82-83, 152 (on teeth and car).

25 E. Horn, "Air as Medium," *Grey Room*, vol. 7 (2008): 6-25; J. Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015): 53-114, especially 55-59, 90-91.

own specific materiality, which becomes invisible in its vital agency as space-binding. Plus, as shown by the media imaginary²⁶ I have highlighted in my reading of *Fish Night* and the *Eikones*, water can be a “ghostly sea.” It is a very elemental medium acting as a deep time-binding agent between nature and culture, between geological and mythical epochs and historically determined technical cultures, as an ontological entanglement between forms of life which are not species-specific.

“Weren’t we once just slimy things, brothers to the things that swim?” asks the older man in Lansdale’s short story, borrowing Coleridge’s words²⁷ about a community not only of humans and of like beings, but of “slimy things.” In this inter-textual *topos* between literature, religion and the natural sciences, fascination and phobia, I read “sliminess”²⁸ as the epitome of the profound time and of the materiality of a colloidal intermediality between technological media (among other types), living beings and elements. Obviously, “sliminess” stands in contrast to the prevailing metaphors or *clichés* of fluidity and transparency, that are frequently used with regard to the media and their relation

26 E. Kluitenberg, *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2006); S. Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).

27 “The very deep did rot: O Christ! / That ever this should be! / Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea” (ll. 125-126), where “a thousand thousand slimy things [with many dead men] / Lived on; and so did I,” said the mariner (ll. 238-239). S.T. Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798-1834), in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912): 191, 197. See J. Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986): 41-59; J.B. Ower, “Crantz, Martens and the ‘Slimy Things’ in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,” *Neophilologus* 85, no. 3 (2001): 477-484; S. Estok, “The Environmental Imagination in the Slime of ‘The Ancient Mariner,’” *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 2, vol. 34 (2021): 135-138.

28 N. Gramlich, “Sticky Media: Encounters with Oil through Imaginary Media Archaeology,” *Communication + 17*, 1 (2018): n. p. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo/vol7/iss1/3>; see F. Mason, *The Viscous: Slime, Stickiness, Fondling, Mixtures* (Goleta CA: punctum books, 2020): 200; B. Woodward, *Slime Dynamics* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012): 59-64; C. Michlig, *File under: Slime* (Los Angeles: Hat & Beard Press, 2023).

with time and materiality and, in particular, with respect to immersivity.

Finally, “media are *of* nature and return to nature.”²⁹ that’s what *Fish Night*, read as a trans-medial allegory combining literature and animation, shows us in a complex and compelling way, inviting to rethink about the phenomenological and ontological relationships between memories, images, bodies, technologies and environments. A recurring *topos* and persistent symptom of media history, imaginaries and narratives, this impossible return is both the origin and the end of our desire for immersivity and immersive experience.

29 J. Parikka, “Introduction: The Materiality of Media and Waste,” in J. Parikka, ed., *Medianatures: The Materiality of Information Technology and Electronic Waste*, (Open Humanities Press, 2011), <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Medianatures>.

History and Stories through Jeremy Deller's Performances



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Abstract

“I wanted to make a memorial that was alive, not an object or set of objects to make a pilgrimage to; a memorial that would come to you, that would appear in your city, town or shopping centre, intervening in your daily life.” With these words, Jeremy Deller introduces us to his *We're Here Because We're Here*, created as part of the events commemorating the First World War. With the help of Rufus Norris, director of the National Theatre, Deller organised a gigantic mass performance in which some 2,000 volunteers disguised as World War I soldiers wandered around the main cities of the United Kingdom without anyone having warned the citizens of their presence. Through this work by Deller (and by comparing it with other artistic experiences), the text intends to investigate how some contemporary artistic interventions seek to exploit the mechanisms of performance in order to reconstruct historical events not only by relying on the strategies of re-enactment, but also by resorting to an immersive relationship linked to the unexpected capable of producing extreme involvement, a process that solicits the emotional states to which, in the harshest moments of war, the community is subjected.

Keywords

[Jeremy Deller](#)

[Public art](#)

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[We're here because we're here](#)

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A memorial that would come to you, that would appear in your city, town or shopping centre, intervening in your daily life¹

The topic (and issue) of monuments and the commemoration of historical events has been at the centre of debate in recent decades. There have been many discussions – in public, within more academic contexts and in art institutions – on the question: can statues or, more generally, artistic events still be – and how – valuable tools for activating processes of remembrance and re-elaboration of collective mourning or past tragic events?

There have also been many striking and spectacular interventions/performances questioning the value of these objects inherited from a past often marked by more than one dark side. We could sum the matter up with these questions: just because they are part of our tradition, are they still able to represent us? Do they have the right to continue to be considered as common symbols to be shared? Or should they be transformed into artistic artefacts that need to be historically contextualised and become part of museum heritage? (On the grounds that museums are better suited to preserving such artefacts and providing accurate descriptions of the context from which they come.) Among the many recent episodes, I believe everyone still has in mind the demolition of the monument to Edward Colston, “benefactor” and slave trader, on 7 June 2020 in Bristol, an event that took place in the emotional aftershock of the killing of George Floyd in the United States and the Black Lives Matter movement.

In today’s climate, there is no shortage of harsh criticism of institutions when they struggle to adapt to the demands of groups and communities who do not feel represented at all and, arguably, express an expectation that some of the fundamental rights of all people should be

1 J. Deller, R. Norris, *We’re here because we’re here* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017): 61.

respected. This is all the more so when dealing with symbols in shared and important places, such as statues and monuments. In this context, the initiative by British institutions to create a complex and cohesive project to mark the centenary of the First World War in an attempt to experiment with new ways of sharing seems to me a fascinating case study. It is clear that, whichever way one reads this historical event, one cannot ignore the fact that it was, in every respect, a long and devastating war. The initiative was a harsh testing ground for artists and institutions, given the risk of falling into the rhetoric of patriotic ideals and the celebration of the courage and daring of the participants, which had until now been indispensable prerequisites for celebrations of historical events such as this.

The UK Arts Programme was the promoter of *14-18 NOW*, a genuinely diverse and cohesive programme that saw the creation of 107 projects, the involvement of 420 artists² using different media (theatre, cinema, visual arts, poetry, music) which, in most cases, were hybrid forms. It is also worth emphasising the very high level of the artists involved; they included Gillian Wearing, John Akomfrah, Raqs Media Collective, Tobias Rehberger, Yinka Shonibare, Suzanne Lacy, Rachel Whiteread, Mark Wallinger, Ryoji Ikeda, and William Kentridge.³ Many had already dealt with contemporary history and the related political problems on their journey. It should therefore be seen as an act of courage on the part of the promoting body – and of recognising the issues underlying an anniversary that could lend itself to controversy and misunderstanding – that they identified artists sensitive to cultural and political commitment who were well aware of the nature and extent of the dangers inherent in a project commemorating a war. One of the

2 According to its official website the project commissioned works from 420 artists, and engaged 35 million people. “About 14-18 Now,” 14-18 Now, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/about/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

3 For the full list see <https://www.1418now.org.uk/artists/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

aims of this event was, therefore, to try to change the narrative that has been made of the history told by European nations mainly through the arts, which have reconstructed and told it exclusively from the point of view of their specific national identities.⁴

Within this experimentation, I would like to place as a case study *We're here because we're here* by Jeremy Deller – created in collaboration with Rufus Norris – because, perhaps more than any other, it seems to me symbolic of the ability to put forward attractive solutions that directly address the role the public takes on in commemorations and make the experience as multi-sensorial and engaging as possible. Elements that are the leitmotif of *Immersed in the Work. From the Environment to Virtual Reality*. In doing so, I would at least like to point out the projects *Across and In-Between* by Suzanne Lacy⁵ and *Pages of the Sea* by Danny Boyle,⁶ which adopt an approach in many ways similar to the work of the London-based artist.

Throughout his career, Jeremy Deller has often chosen subjects related to history and politics and has always used a collaborative and participatory approach right from the design phase. His artistic practices have

4 In order to clarify the position of the planners, the words of Margaret MacMillan, who, in the introduction to the volume collecting information on *14-18 Now*, explains “Governments often want to tidy up the past and impose a single unified version of what happened back then - at Waterloo, say, or the Battle of the Somme. But there can be no one view. Women, men, diverse ethnic groups, religions or social classes, start from different viewpoints, and what they see in the past may be guided by that. So marking the 100th anniversary of the First World War, that vast and destructive struggle from 1914 to 1918, was never going to be easy. We can agree that it was a catastrophe that destroyed the old confident Europe and left a strangely and irrevocably altered world. Beyond that there are, and always have been, profound differences over how we remember and commemorate that war. We still cannot agree on how it started or why it went on for so long, and we still debate its meaning and its legacy a century later.” J. Waldman, M. MacMillan, eds., *14-18 Now: Contemporary Arts Commissions for the First World War Centenary* (Profile: London, 2019). See also within the same volume the essay by David Olusoga. Cfr D. Olusoga, “Art as a lens: Re-Globalising the First War,” *ibid.*: 12-13.

5 Suzanne Lacy’s work, made between 18 and 23 October 2018, on the occasion of the centenary of Ireland’s Declaration of Independence (and the subsequent border that has since divided Northern Ireland from Éire) aims to investigate borders and the influence they have had on our lives. See: <https://www.1418now.org.uk/commissions/across-and-in-between/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

6 Boyle’s work, *Pages of the Sea*, took place on 11 November 2018 and was intended to celebrate the centenary of the Armistice. See “On 11 November 2018,” *Pages of The Sea*, <https://www.pagesofthesea.org.uk>, accessed December 15, 2022.

contributed to redefining the boundaries of contemporary art also because, in creating his works, he has had to try his hand as an art producer, director, event organiser, archivist as well as photographer, performer and installation creator, the latter roles being more standard within contemporary art.

The project commissioned by the WW1 Centenary Art Commission from Deller was related to celebrating the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest battles in military history. Over 141 days, more than a million casualties were recorded. On the first day alone, the British Army suffered 57,470 casualties. Jeremy Deller's idea was to create a mobile and temporary memorial⁷ that would dialogue with the present day and attempt to overturn the need to create a specific place dedicated to the memory of people and events by conceiving, instead, "a memorial that would come to you, that would appear in your city, town or shopping centre, intervening in your daily life. [...] It was as much about today as it was about 1916."⁸ To meet this need, with the help of Rufus Norris – the theatre and film director who has been Artistic Director of the National Theatre since 2015 – he staged a massive performance in which more than 1,400 volunteers, dressed in the uniforms of World War I soldiers, with no public announcement of their presence, appeared in more than 40 cities⁹ on 1 July 2016, making contact with UK citizens going about their daily business, and moving from one part of a city to another.

Deller had deliberately excluded the actors/ participants from meeting in all those places that had,

7 "I wanted to make a contemporary memorial to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, one that moved around the UK with an unpredictability in which the participants, by their actions, took the memorial to the public."

Deller in <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-about/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

8 J. Deller, R. Norris, *We're here because we're here*: 61.

9 To access the map of the event see <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-map/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

even remotely, a relation to celebrations and rituals – so no churches, public buildings, cemeteries, or locations of historical significance. In their place, train or metro stations, busy squares and streets, shopping malls or meeting places.

Often in rather thickly crowded groups, these anachronistic soldiers had to present themselves in central areas and busy places to interact with citizens, returning their gaze and smiling at them, although they were not expected to engage in conversations or stimulate verbal exchanges. They had to limit themselves, occasionally and chorally, to singing a song to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne” with the words “We’re here because we’re here because we’re here,” hence the title of the work. British soldiers¹⁰ also often used this line as a hymn wishing for the war’s end.

The idea of remaining silent was Norris’s suggestion,¹¹ and, in a way, silence became a real communicative strategy for Deller to construct his sort of re-enactment:¹² the silence before the event, which was completely concealed from the public until the day the performers appeared in the cities, and the substantial silence of the participants interrupted by the chants that occasionally accompanied the soldiers in their wanderings through the

10 Deller explained: “When I read about this song, I realised I not only had an activity for the men but also a title for the piece. It explains nothing, it’s pointless and repetitive, a little like the fate of a foot soldier or even the nature of man’s addiction to conflict.” J. Deller, R. Norris, *We’re here because we’re here*: 61.

11 C. Higgins, “#Wearehere: Somme tribute revealed as Jeremy Deller work,” *The Guardian* (July 1, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jul/01/wearehere-battle-somme-tribute-acted-out-across-britain>, accessed December 15, 2022.

12 Although, as we shall see, Deller has constructed genuine re-enactments, on this occasion this work cannot be properly considered as such, even though, often, this term is used as a hypernym. On this subject see S. Mudu, “Under the sign of Reenactment,” in C. Baldacci, S. Franco, eds., *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* (Turin: Accademia University Press, 2022).

cities. During the weeks of training¹³ in the run-up to 1 July, Norris and Deller had explicitly requested of all participants that interaction with the spectators should stop there, at silence, at a simple exchange of glances, and that the possible explanation/interpretation of the event unfolding before the mostly astonished eyes of the spectators should be left to the calling card – a choice dictated by both purely technical and symbolic issues. The performative action – given the vastness of the intervention and the mass of people involved – had to remain as simple as possible so as not to force the performers to improvise in the face of the incalculable variables imposed in an open dialogue with the casual passer-by. The conversation, therefore, would have been entirely uncontrollable and (also given that none of the participants had any professional acting training) the quality standards would probably have suffered.

In addition, although I am not aware that this was made explicit, it would also have posed a problem of a symbolic nature: each participant in the performance was the apparition or “ghost” of a dead person, and therefore, silence was the most suitable form to evoke the victims. The actual interaction with the audience, then, took place only through a common calling card which established a dialogue of glances in the explanation of the work – I represent someone, a specific person with a name, regiment, or rank, who died a hundred years ago, even if I am not him – and which at the same time also became the tombstone, the

13 An interesting insight into the training period for the performers in this project can be found in a conversation between Deller and Emily Lim. Cfr. E. Lim, J. Deller, “Relaxed, open, alive, kind, engaged,” in R. Norris, J. Deller, *We’re Here Because We’re Here*: 104-113. Here, we also find a document with the “Five Golden Words: Relaxed, open, alive, kind, engaged” and the “Four Golden Rules: 1. Stay Alive – Keep it natural, be comfortable, don’t ever be a statue! 2. Seek Eye Contact – be interested in the public but don’t *intimidate* them, it’s not a staring competition! 3. Be Kind to the public, don’t ever be rude! 4. Each Card is a *Gift* – make eye contact when you give it, watch the public’s reaction to it.” *Ibid.*: 104.

remnant of the monument.¹⁴ In a video filmed by the BBC on this project, Deller said that he owed the idea of making the soldiers who died in that battle appear as ghosts to something he had read during the research period before the work, in which he had found interesting information

about phenomena in Britain during the war – of women mainly – seeing dead loved ones in the street, just catching a glimpse of someone on a bus or through a shop window thinking it was their husband or their brother or their son. It became quite a big thing, all these sightings, these apparitions of the dead. So it was as if the project had already happened during the war. People had already seen the dead in the streets.¹⁵

Compared to a monument or a more traditional re-enactment of a historical event, which asks us to respect the hero's sacrifice and celebrate it, Deller shifts the focus to the individual persons, or rather, to the void they left behind, filling it through the concretisation of the ghost of the missing person, thus giving shape to the void created around each of the people who disappeared in the war. This shift also reflects the artist's desire to avoid any sentimentality in the representation: "Avoid Sentimentality" was the instruction written on one of his reproduced sheets of notes. The artist explicitly speaks of the goal of giving the audience a "jolt,"¹⁶ and a jolt, after all, is at the opposite extreme of storytelling and words of condolence with which

14 "We also equipped each man with a set of 'calling cards' which bore the name, regiment and rank of a soldier who died on 1 July. He was representing that person, not pretending to be him. The card was effectively a gravestone, and if a member of the public paid attention to a soldier in any way he or she was given one," J. Deller, R. Norris, *We're here because we're here*: 61.

15 W. Yu (@weiyu970), "Jeremy Deller – We're Here Because We're Here," YouTube video (November 26, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXnr3w74TJs&t=158s>, accessed December 15, 2022.

16 J. Deller in J. Deller, R. Norris, *We're here because we're here*: 61.

to remember the many qualities of those who have left us – usual procedures in a commemoration of historical events.

Nevertheless, the heart of this work is absolutely emotional; in fact, the people who found themselves passing through the cities engaged with the performance were sucked into the event, not only because they felt surrounded by it but, above all, because the absence of rhetoric made them feel exempt from any pressing request to take sides, to accept being part of a community, as any ritual (even a secular one) imposes. The request was only to participate. And perhaps it is precisely in this form of engagement that the diversity lies, compared to others, of Deller’s fascinating offering. It appropriates with this immense “delegated performance”¹⁷ the principles of spectacularity; it is the child of cinema and a digital and social media culture,¹⁸ but, at the same time, does not create artificial distances between spectator and performer, given that the extreme proximity of the encounter with the soldiers made the experience somehow simultaneously unique and intimate.

However, this was not the first time that Deller had used these modes of immersive engagement to recreate the feeling at least of an episode from the past and bring back to life a part of history that we have forgotten or repressed. This had already happened with *It Is What It Is: Conversation about Iraq*, from 2009, a collaborative work with Creative Time and the New Museum in New York, in which he had taken a car destroyed by explosives found in Iraq on a tour of 14 US museums to serve as a “backdrop”

17 I refer to the category used by Claire Bishop in C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

18 See C. Eva, “Reaching the Public” in J. Deller, R. Norris, *We’re here because we’re here: 115-116*, which begins with the statement: “In many ways *We’re here because we’re here* is an artwork for the age of social media.”

to a conversation space in which Iraqi citizens and American military personnel, among others, were invited.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the work that, in terms of organisational strategy and spectator involvement, serves as the premise for *We're here because we're here* is undoubtedly *The Battle of Orgreave*, from 2001, in which Deller attempted to recreate live – again, as a gigantic participatory performance – the clashes between police and striking miners at the Orgreave Coking Plant in Yorkshire on 18 June 1984. This episode, one of the harshest and most divisive for Britain in the 1980s and the Thatcher era, had affected Deller as a teenager at the time:

I wanted to find out what exactly happened on that day with a view to re-enacting or commemorating it in some way. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the strike, like a civil war, had a traumatically divisive effect at all levels of life in the UK. Families were torn apart because of divided loyalties, the union movement was split on its willingness to support the National Union of Mineworkers, the print media especially contributed to the polarisation of the arguments to the point where there appeared to be little space for a middle ground. So in all but name it became an ideological and industrial battle between the two sections of British society.²⁰

Commissioned and produced by Artangel, *The Battle of Orgreave* was a reconstruction involving about

19 On his website Deller explains: “This project started as the idea to create a mobile museum of the war in Iraq that would tour the US. Finding material for the museum proved difficult, until we were offered a car that had been used in previous exhibitions. From this car, used as a centrepiece, we constructed a room in the museum where the public could meet and talk to people involved in the conflict in some way. The idea was then taken on the road; we towed the car from New York to LA, stopping off in 14 towns and cities on the way – a classic American road trip route – accompanied by an Iraqi citizen and an enlisted American soldier. It was presented in as neutral a way as possible, which puzzled a lot of people. But it meant that the public were more likely to talk to us, because they weren’t scared of being dragged into some sort of political arena. Sometimes these conversations went on for hours. The car was subsequently donated to the Imperial War Museum in London”
<https://www.jeremydeller.org/ItsWhatIts/ItsWhatIts.php> accessed December 15, 2022.

20 J. Deller, *The English Civil War / Part II* (London: Artangel, 2002): 7.

a thousand people²¹ – around 800 who had taken part in historical re-enactments, approximately 200 former miners and an unknown number of people who were part of the police force at the time. It was also, in parallel, a massive piece of research with information, photos and videos in addition to, as already described in *We're here because we're here*, a long collective preparation work in which the former miners, above all, also had the role of helping in the reconstruction of events. And as with *The Battle of Orgreave*, one cannot fail to be struck by the enormous organisational effort that displays all of Deller's ability to rely on a network of knowledge and professional expertise, even with associations involved in battle re-enactments and costumed historical events.²²

Here, too, we find the artist's interest in the processes of collective memory and its loss, but *The Battle of Orgreave* was also an attempt to reconstruct the very idea of society that Thatcher had denied – one of her slogans was “There is no such thing as Society” – precisely through the concept of delegation and collaboration with others to achieve a common interest. As far as possible, Deller relied on the memories of the miners and police officers to recreate the battle scene, putting the many newspaper articles in the background; in essence, allowing the many personal memories to direct the course of the re-enactment.

It is a reconstruction process not to be considered definitively concluded since Deller presents it again in the form of a film (shot by Mike Figgs), an archive (in the

21 Ibid.; See also A. Correia, “Interpreting Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*,” *Visual Culture in Britain*, no.7 (2006): 93-112.

22 On this subject, numerous articles and volumes have come out on both the artistic and the more purely theatrical side. In addition to the texts already mentioned, I would add: R. Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Routledge: London, 2011); M. Franko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); V. Agnew., J. Lamb, J. Tomann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2020); C. Baldacci, C. Nicastro, A. Sforzini, eds., *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022); C. Baldacci, S. Franco, eds., *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* (Accademia University Press: Turin, 2022).

Tate Modern collection), and a catalogue (*The English Civil War / Part II*), and it nevertheless remains present in the minds of the many participants and spectators (a distinction whose legitimacy is to be verified) who took part in the reconstruction of the events on 17 June 2001.

As Amelia Jones explains well,

crucially, *The Battle of Orgreave* itself is continually changing— and is never presented as a “final” or fully coherent work or object, even though it consists of documents, objects, and other material traces of prior re-enactments. Notably, too, while many of the other re-enactments tellingly substitute the re-enactor as new “author” of a unique and ultimately static (documented) work, Deller himself does not feature in a noticeable way either as part of the re-enactment or the public relations materials circulating around the film, its most visible “documentation”—the work in its infinite permutations does not tend to devolve back to a singular body, though it does only have coherence in relation to the author-name Jeremy Deller.²³

Deller is fascinated by history, but instead of seeking its element of order, repetition, and the possibility of foreseeing things, he strives to make room for the complexity that is necessarily chaos and confusion. As art critic Teresa Macrì points out in her *Politics/poetics*,²⁴ it is disorder that fascinates the artist, and often this confusion is identified with mass movements, collective participation, and the public dimension of his work.

From a historical point of view, these projects can be juxtaposed with Jochen Gerz’s *Counter-Monument*,²⁵ but I believe that Deller’s works are more a continuation

23 A. Jones, “‘The Artist is Present.’ Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR. The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (2021): 16-45, 24.

24 T. Macrì, *Politics/Poetics* (Milano: Postmedia, 2014).

25 J.E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 267-296.

of the actions of political art collectives in the 1970s and 1980s, and I am thinking above all of Group Material – which disbanded in 1996²⁶ – or the previously mentioned art activist Suzanne Lacy. As in their work, in the operations of the British artist there is no truth to be sought with an ideological attitude, rather the aim is to try to share ideas and above all to try to listen to the many dissonant voices and counter-narratives that have not been given sufficient space in the dominant discourse. At the same time, he perhaps distances himself from them precisely because of the popular/spectacular dimension that his works take on, because of the attention he dedicates to the spectator – a role that is always possible and never wholly absent in his works, which goes hand in hand with that of participant/performer.

26 “It’s hard not to feel that Group Material broke significant ground but missed the party. The year they broke up, 1996, coincides with a proliferation of new forms of social practice lately successful in museum exhibitions and biennials, whether in the work of Francis Alÿs or Jeremy Deller.” A. Green, “Citizen Artists: Group Material,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 26 (2011): 17-25.

From Inside to Outside (and Vice Versa)¹



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Abstract

This contribution will focus on some aspects of the roots of environmental art in Italy, with reference to works created between the 1950s and 1960s by Lucio Fontana, to environments designed by members of Gruppo T and other artists (Giulio Paolini, Luciano Fabro) in the 1960s, and through reflections on the different uses of space that were defined with the exhibition *Lo spazio dell'immagine* held in Foligno in 1967. The approach is not, however, that of a historical review of well-known events, but of an investigation into the way to understand the relationship between outside and inside, the sense and value of the “passage,” the conception of the modifying factors, starting with light, which have acted on the definition of space as an element to be perceived, rather than a place to be in, emphasising the dynamics that define a dialectical, if not antithetical, relationship with respect to architectural and design qualities in the proper sense, leading to reading the environmental art intervention as an invitation to follow a path.

Keywords

[Outside-inside](#)

[Light](#)

[Grazia Varisco](#)

[Gruppo T](#)

[Lucio Fontana](#)

¹ The title of this contribute takes up the one elaborated for my essay in the catalogue of the exhibition M. Meneguzzo, ed., *Grazia Varisco: Percorsi contemporanei 1957-2022* (Milan: Skira, 2022, exhibition catalogue), having at its end a reflection on a work by the same Grazia Varisco.

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My paper addresses the question of the environment, a practice implemented in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on the relationship between the position of the “observer” and the structural elements of the artworks, as well as the role reversal between subject and object in the work of art and its perceptual process.

A few of the contents I will present are derived from a course I held recently at Università Cattolica in Milan, focused on the relationship between the idea and realization of a certain type of “sites” in several forms of visual art that have moved from the representative dimension to that of an active participation in space, meant as the articulation of relationship between different fields and subjects. Sites implying a “passage,” such as the window and, the door, the threshold, the labyrinth and finally the mirror. All of these sites could be defined as “transitional.”² Among them, one with a peculiar symbolic (as well as practical) relevance is the “corridor:” an architectural space which essentially connects different rooms in an apartment and tends to be perceived merely as a service space, in some way devoid of a function of its own. In the royal palaces from past eras, it was often used to measure the distance from the outside – the realm of common people – to the inside – the place of power. So, it owns a strongly temporal dimension, as demonstrated by Aleksandr Sokurov in the film *Russian Ark* (2002), along which the author relives Russian history as a journey through the corridors (and halls) of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

In such sense, the corridor is the form with which the purpose of a form of art qualified as “environmental” is best identified, through artworks addressing space as actual matter, and not an inert dimension; more specifically, the matter of a presentation both objective and subjective. As critics have consistently pointed out, most of the projects of this environmental kind tend to be perceived

² And so I defined them in the book derived by that course: F. Tedeschi, *Luoghi di transizione: forme e immagini di “passaggio,” fra arte e architettura* (Brescia: Scholé-Morcelliana, 2020). I would like to thank Andrea Pinotti and Elisabetta Modena, who asked me to take part in this publication on the basis of the topics I dealt with there.

as “paths” and not as static or stable sites to contemplate. The corridor, as in the most crucial artistic proposals, is what lies in the middle, giving substance, sometimes in an impalpable and invisible way, to a space kept in continuity between two conditions. It has to be considered – to borrow a term from the psychology of perception – as an “in-between.” It’s the “space between,” the subject matter for a distracted attention; an intermediate nature which can nonetheless constitute the very reason for its legitimization.

Let me begin with an emblematic image, an extremely suggestive painting by 17th Century Dutch painter Samuel van Hoogstraten, a follower of Rembrandt. It is known as *View of a corridor* (oil on canvas, 1662; Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire). It could be considered as the junction between two cultural inheritances, that of perspective as a system for processing represented space, and that of the analytical investigation of the interiors of bourgeois houses in 17th Century Holland. What might catch the eye of today’s viewer is the sense of emptiness in the central part of the painting, immersed in a peculiar light, that could be considered as the actual subject of the work. Of course, the “void” is not absolute, given the presence of many decorative elements, as well as some humans and animals placed at the margins, qualifying the combination between anthropic and architectural dimensions. Yet, the void “fills up” the central part of the painting, infused as it is with light, reflections, shadows. With all of these elements taking the viewers on a visual journey through the represented space, this uncluttered area holds the function of questioning them, of bringing them inside, into the silence of an intimate place.³ Of course, this place attracts and intrigues the viewer precisely because of its domestic character, starting with the juxtaposition between the dog and the mop in the foreground. The most important feature of the painting, here, is that it is based on emptiness as a

3 This painting is considered in several moments of V.I. Stoichita, *L’instauration du tableau* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1993). See also, for the concept of a space overturned from outside to inside, G. Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

way to deny any subject matter: at the same time, it can be considered as an anecdotal exercise, which goes beyond any narrative logic. For that, it is a very “modern” painting.

Looking at the opposite end of this elaboration of the theme of the “void,” we can immediately move to one of the light installations that reveal the sense of a “corridor” characterized by light as the medium of the artwork. An absolute zeroing, if not for the effect produced by the substance of the light, is the specific object of Dan Flavin’s attention: for instance, in his project for a wing of the Litta Menafoglio Panza di Biumo villa in Varese, following the commission by Giuseppe Panza. The transition through the different connotations of light coming from the side rooms – as well as that produced by the lighting of the very corridor defining the space of the architecture in its depth – articulates a visual and physical “path” determined by the variability of its solutions, due to the effect of the design of the color-lights, generating a truly modern and apparently claustrophobic perception of space as pure architecture, measurement, time.

Thinking of a form of art based on space as a medium, however, we must mention the example of Lucio Fontana and his environments, possibly the most striking instance of an artwork progressively dematerialized by its tangible, material state. With Fontana, we are at the crossroads of multiple impulses, such as the tension to overcome the distinction between different techniques, to imagine a proposal for an autonomous space, embodied by light itself and in its relationship with the architectural context.

In these three types of artworks – the van Hoogstraten’s painting and the environments by Flavin and Fontana – we encounter three different articulations of an ongoing journey through space, either literal or delegated to an imaginary subject, with his or her body and gaze. A space that is both objective and subjective, meant as it is to host a projection of the self in the place, and, at the same time, to constitute a manifestation of its own, a reason for the actions of a simultaneously active “I/you,” as

a kind of relationship between the inside and the outside that involves the subject in a shared perception.⁴

In his 1949 *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*, Fontana equipped the space of Galleria del Naviglio with a particular light, which could appear futuristic at the time: a Wood's lamp, surrounded by mobile fluorescent shapes cut out of papier-mâché, almost as if to justify the existence of an object to look at and perceive in a newly-configured space. Some of his subsequent structures would be even more radical, such as the one created in Amsterdam in 1967, consisting of an intersection between five narrow corridors placed side by side, and completed by a perpendicular one: a T-shaped transit space bathed in red light. This installation was reenacted, with updated technological means, in the striking, accurate reconstruction of Lucio Fontana's environments at Hangar Bicocca a few years ago. Even with this installation – one of the least celebrated among Fontana's spaces, which explains why it was not reenacted until the 2017 exhibition, and then again as the only "environment" displayed in the 2019 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York – Fontana appears to anticipate some of the effects produced by a few American artists, who reduced the investigation of space to a matter of perception. A practice exemplified by the work of Bruce Nauman, and particularly by his "corridors" and their constrictive, delocalizing effects. By shifting the focus from structure to perception (which is what distinguishes Nauman's works from Flavin's), we actually question the very nature of space, at the same time introducing the notion of a somehow objectified ego. The observer is observed, and thus turned into a visual object, particularly in installations featuring TV screens and cameras that reproduce – in alienated fashion – the actions performed by the viewers

4 In this sense, this concept is close to the use of the definition of "avatarization" by Andrea Pinotti; see A. Pinotti, "Procuratori del sé. Avatar e avatarizzazione," in T. Gatti, D. Maini, eds., *Visual studies: l'avvento di nuovi paradigmi* (Milan: Mimesis, 2019): 27-40.

themselves. The screen thus becomes a spying device or a “magic mirror.”

A center of such investigation of the inside-outside relationship could be found in the questions on the origin of forms outlining space itself. These are extended, then, to the relationship between internal and external space in a specific instance, and also to the questions about the subject and the object of the experience. For this reason, we shall address how Fontana approaches an important phase in the development of his *Spatial Concepts*, concerned with the practical manifestation of an idea of space revealed in the apparent two-dimensional nature of the picture format.

In 1952 several canvases from the more specifically “cosmogonic” series⁵ were used by the artist to demonstrate how they could be conceived as “fragments of space” or space generators, in the sense that their entity is manifested in a twofold way: as works to be looked at frontally or to be “pierced” by light, thus creating a new space modified by the luminous projection of the holes, and at the same time canceling out the pictorial surface on which they are actually located. This exploration – presented through a series of photographs, one of which was chosen to illustrate the catalogue of the exhibition at Galleria del Naviglio that year – was followed up in the experiments carried out by Fontana with television, in the tests carried out at the RAI studios in Milan. In this case, as far as we can see, Fontana was even more focused on the “hidden” side of his works, foregrounding the light trails that occupied that “other space” represented by the projection screen. Conceptually, this exploration can also be considered one of the roots of the recent elaborations of “VR” or immersive reality in the creation of virtual spaces, both from a technological philosophical perspective.

We can certainly trace this evolution from the light-pierced *Spatial Concepts* to the actual environment

5 As they were categorized by Enrico Crispolti in his analysis of Fontana’s work. See E. Crispolti, *Fontana: catalogo generale* (Milan: Electa, 1986); see also E. Crispolti, *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana* (Rome: Carocci, 1971).

in a few works created by the artist in the following years, such as that for the 1964 Triennale, the one displayed in Minneapolis in 1966, or the one included in the exhibit *Spazio dell'immagine* in Foligno, in 1967. It may be useful to elaborate briefly on the latter exhibition, due to its historical relevance, as it established two very different directions in exploring the relationship with space.

On the one hand, as in Fontana's works, space is conceived as the very material of the work, an environment to inhabit, in which those who pass through or linger become part of a perceptive condition (of a field).⁶ On the other hand, space is seen as the environment for an "image" or an "object," either complete in itself or combined, according to specific forms of installation. Such distinction cannot be too rigid, as the two tendencies were intersected on several occasions. However, proposals such as that by Enrico Castellani can be recognized as deriving directly from Fontana's example. Castellani's *White environment* applies principles of design and architecture the artist had already identified in a singular "Albertian" derivation the previous year, in his room at the Venice Biennale. Again, *Intercamera plastica* by Paolo Scheggi, *Blu abitabile* by Agostino Bonalumi, *Interpretazione speculare* by Getulio Alviani, up to *After Structures* by Gianni Colombo, one of the environments with the decisive presence of light that varies the perception, are all to be considered as products of Fontana's influence. At the crossroads with the condition of the object are the instances of a "space within space," which can be exemplified by Mario Ceroli's *Gabbia* or by Luciano Fabro's *In-cubo (to Carla Lonzi)*. On the other hand, leaving aside works of singular importance, such as the *Pozzi-specchio* by Pistoletto or *Tube* by Eliseo Mattiacci, one could mention the staging by Tano Festa, *Subito dopo il cielo* (dedicated to Francesco Lo Savio), for its poetic quality. This brief list serves to illustrate the different practices showcased in a project that explored both the

6 An important presence in psychological, sociological and planning studies in that time is the so-called "theory of field," proposed in Italy by Attilio Marcolli. See A. Marcolli, *Teoria del campo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971).

aforementioned directions, from the tributes to Lucio Fontana and Ettore Colla, which provided the respective points of departure, and somehow emerged clearly in the various texts in the exhibition catalogue.⁷ In some of them, we find an echo of the ideas put forward, on the occasion of the earlier exhibition *Fuoco Immagine Acqua Terra* (L'Attico, Rome, June 1967), by Maurizio Calvesi and Alberto Boatto, and the origin of the definition of “Im-Space” which, a few months later, would be linked to the first appearance of “Arte Povera,” in the exhibition *Arte Povera – Im Spazio*, curated by Germano Celant at the La Bertesca gallery in Genoa (September-October 1967).

What I have said so far may provide a useful background for a work that I perceive as emblematic of an idea of space as a “path,” but with peculiar attention to light as substitute of gaze. This environment appears like a closed room; however, it produces, from the inside, a sense of passage, an immediate relationship between the physical eye and the virtual eye of a source of light that pushes on space as if to open it up. I am referring to the environment created by Grazia Varisco for the Schwarz gallery in Milan in October 1969 (Fig.1). The installation has been recreated on several occasions in recent years (Fig. 2).⁸ The room, conceived by the artist as an environment designed in an extremely articulated way, covers an overall perimeter significantly larger than its actual size, expanding the sensation or perception of time, besides that of space. To make this sensation tangible, the author darkened the space, a frequent solution among the artists

7 See the catalogue of the exhibition which took place in 1967 at Palazzo Trinci in Foligno: U. Apollonio, G.C., Argan, P. Bucarelli, eds., *Lo spazio dell'immagine* (Venice: Alfieri Editori d'Arte, 1967).

8 See the catalogue of the exhibition which took place at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome from December 14, 2005 to May 21, 2006: M. Margozzi, L. Meloni, F. Lardera, eds., *Gli ambienti del Gruppo T. Le origini dell'arte interattiva* (Roma: Silvana, 2006, exhibition catalogue): 54-55, 32-35. For further information about this and other environments of the group see L. Meloni, *Gli ambienti del Gruppo T* (Roma: Silvana, 2004). More recently, Varisco's environment has been exhibited in *Vertigo: Op Art and a History of Deception 1520-1970*, MUMOK, Wien, 25 May - 26 October, 2019 (the exhibition also travelled to Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart, November 23, 2019 - April 20, 2020), before the retrospective hosted at Palazzo Reale in Milan from June 2 to September 16, 2022; see the catalogue: M. Meneguzzo, ed., *Grazia Varisco: Percorsi Contemporanei 1957-2022* (Milan: Skira, 2022, exhibition catalogue); F. Tedeschi, “Dall'interno all'esterno (e viceversa). Il concetto di spazio 'percorribile' nell'opera di Grazia Varisco,” *ibidem*: 26-29.

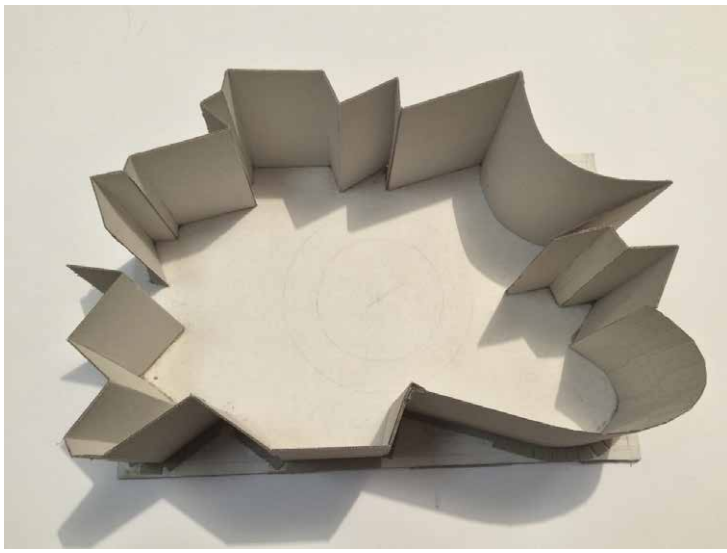


Fig. 1. G. Varisco, model of the *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, 1969, reconstruction of the environment for the solo exhibition at Galleria Schwarz, Milan, 1969.

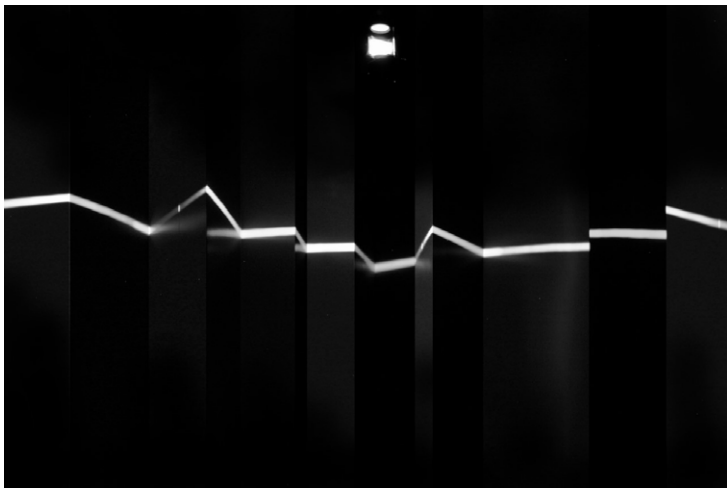


Fig. 2. G. Varisco, reconstruction of the environment *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, 1969, at the exhibition “Gli ambienti del gruppo T,” Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome, 2006.

who, following the Fontana’s example, used light as a creative and descriptive element of space. As a matter of fact, Varisco placed a “luminous eye” at the center, which, by means of a mechanical process, rotates progressively, indicating the trajectory of a path that pushed from the inside outwards, generating a visual and physical sensation at the same time. The light replaces, rather than following it, the gaze of the person undertaking the role of “bystander,” to quote Brandi:⁹ i.e. a presence experiencing space as a relationship between being and existing. This, as the artist observes, increases the complexity of an active participation, as well as physical relationship, with the site, plunged as it is into the interiority of darkness: the viewer actually experiences two alternative spaces, that of the eye-line of

⁹ See C. Brandi, *Struttura e architettura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967) and *Teoria generale della critica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974).

light and that of the eye-physical presence of the viewer's own body.

Perhaps, the very essence of the work lies precisely in its drive to overcome the constraints of the structure, without actually doing more than absorbing the enchantment of a suspended, outstretched time. The underlying character of the work is then a condition of "path" to be completed according to the twofold participation of an active movement and a virtual one. It should be noted that, about ten days before the inauguration of her solo show at the Schwarz gallery – on which occasion this environment, *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, was proposed – Grazia Varisco had participated to *Campo Urbano*, an event promoted by Luciano Caramel in Como. Here, she made an intervention in a public space, immortalized by the photographs by Ugo Mulas, who followed and documented the events of that memorable day. On that occasion, Varisco had appropriated a street in the town center, involving a large group of people to help here create a series of walls arranged in a meander, made up of cardboard boxes. By cluttering up the road, the work extended the time necessary to walk through it. This operation was also called *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, and in this case the perception of the "urban field," experienced alternatively with amusement or annoyance, resulted in an immediate application of a principle of modification of reality, due to the presence of a structure that affects movement and, as a consequence, the psychological perception of the entire environment. As the artist writes in the short note later published in the catalogue of the Schwarz gallery exhibition, "I see and feel longer. The reactions of impatience or satisfaction change if I try the route again."¹⁰

10 G. Varisco, "Dilatazione spazio temporale di un percorso" in G. Accame, *Grazia Varisco* (Bergamo: Maredarte, 2001): 102.

As in other environmental works from a time imbued with a strong imagination of the future, the labyrinth condition produced by these two operations can be seen as an experiment on a way of thinking and feeling in relation to objects and space. The echo of this attitude is evident in a series of works produced by the artist in the following years, titled *Random walks by random numbers*. In these screen-printed compositions, the combination of chance and design produce a virtual direction into which the viewers are supposed to get lost, and then rediscover themselves, as Varisco states: “And I play with imagination: I imagine moving robotically, in a defined space with unpredictable steps – or with a pencil on squared paper – letting myself be guided exclusively by the sequence of numbers to which I have previously associated a direction. Chance and design. Not being able to predict my path, I don’t know if my movements will be contained in the space, on the sheet.”¹¹

From the virtual space of painting to the real space of the built environment, from the virtual space of a projection that includes the viewer as a participant and an object, to that of a sheet that records movements, either made or imagined, the creation of an interior from the exterior and the reworking of an outside from the inside are exemplified here through a practice rooted in the drive to explore space, which has guided, up to this point, the experiments of several generations of artists.

11 G. Varisco, “Random Walks – 1972,” in G. Accame, *Grazia Varisco*: 108.

Mutual Transformations: Unstable Relations between VR-Works, Environments and Exhibitions



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Abstract

In contemporary understanding, a now normalized immersion continues to be associated with digitality and high-tech apparatuses, but is also seen as diffused into the lifeworld. Against this backdrop, the article focuses on two current artworks that extend the internal environmentality inherent in VR as a spatialized image into physical space by using strategies from installation and site-related art. These examples provide for an equation and nesting of work, environment and exhibition that is interpreted here as a potentiated environmentalization. The artistic VR-environments by no means negate their rootedness in imagery, but rather self-reflexively reveal the transitions between image and three-dimensionality, what gives them a special epistemic valence. It thus seems worthwhile to relate them to considerations of knowledge objects and exhibitions, but also to (queer) phenomenological theories of entanglement and becoming originating from the following of lines.

Meanwhile, the epistemic value of their latent objects, disoriented paths, and impossible spaces is only revealed in the interaction with and embodied experience of the virtual space. The article thus participates in debates on how bodily immersion does not exclude, but enables action and reflection within aesthetic experience. With regard to two fundamental paradigms of immersion, it can show how, for this purpose, the artworks turn anew the strategies of de-distancing and de-differentiation.

Keywords [VR-art](#) [Environmental immersion](#) [Epistemic](#)
[Objects installation art](#) [De-distancing/de-differentiation](#)

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De-Distancing and De-Differentiation: Contemporary Aesthetics of Immersion

Immersion is again attracting much attention. Film and media studies, art history, image sciences and narratology have all long participated in its theorization. More recently, theatre, performance and game studies, architectural theory and the history of knowledge¹ have joined in, taking into account a whole range of everyday digital technologies and thus deferring questions of image aesthetics and image technology in favor of investigating body/media/environment relationships. Whereas some theoretical contributions highlight the immersive aspects of a specific medium, there is also a broad tendency to deal with immersion as a prime symptom of today's image cultures and media ecologies what is evidenced by collective terms such as immersive media,² environmental images and iconoscapes. To speak more generally of immersive media deliberately goes beyond media-technical foundations of the concept by arguing with transmedial relevant operations. These are already rooted in narratology, where the opening up and simultaneous closing of a fictional world is accomplished cognitively-mentally: Perceptual immersion is therefore seen to be necessarily complemented by imaginative immersion,³ which only ensures that the sensory stimuli of a medium are translated into a virtual world.⁴ After the debate has been strongly linked to Virtual Reality since the 1990s, immersion continues to be considered under the premises of digital technologies, but at the same time is also discussed as nowadays' *conditio humana* and condition of daily life. Lars C. Grabbe has proposed a new

1 Cfr. D. Kasprowicz, *Der Körper auf Tauchstation: Zu einer Wissensgeschichte der Immersion* (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2019). For Kasprowicz, the immersion concept can be retrieved from the "maelstrom of negative connotations as illusion and absorption" by being understood as a "media anthropological practice of de- and re-differentiation of the body [Körper und Leib] in mediatized environments." Ibid.: 14.

2 Cfr., among others, the Yearbook of *Immersive Media* 2011-2017, ed. by Institute for Immersive Media at Kiel University of Applied Sciences.

3 Cfr. D. Kasprowicz, *Der Körper auf Tauchstation*: 18, with reference to Marie-Laure Ryan.

4 Cfr. T. Hochscherf, H. Kjær, P. Rupert-Kruse, "Phänomene und Medien der Immersion," in *Jahrbuch immersiver Medien* 3 (2011): 9-19, 14, with reference to Matthew Lombard/Theresa Ditton.

cultural-theoretical figure of the *homo immergens* which he considers to be the equivalent of a culture of media hybrids: In succession or better combination of the human capacities for symbol formation and image production, the *homo immergens* has become the creator of its own “multimodal and simulative environments”⁵ whereby the distance to the medial artifact is reduced and a worldly experience is generated.

Thus, recent insights of immersion research owe much to theorizing across media, on the basis of media hybridity, as well as to inputs from other branches of scholarship. Within these multi-faceted approaches two key features emerge that I propose to summarize as a reduction of distance responsible for felt presence and as a reduction of difference. These two aspects cover both, the particular attitude of reception, which has been characterized as a way of submerging, of mental absorption, and bodily-emotional involvement, as well as the various forms of transformative exchange or even assimilation that occur between the recipient and the object of contemplation – to put it in the classical dichotomy of aesthetic experience. Meanwhile, the principles of de-distancing and de-differentiation unfold in numerous ways. They involve more-than-visual, bodily modes of experience, that can be interpreted as a re-centering of the world and the subject, but also as new forms of empathy and encounter. The latter may culminate in ideas of matter-flow inspired by Deleuze/Guattari and of leaving behind all subject-object dichotomies, which some suppose to be still at work in the quasi-objects of the philosophy of science.⁶ Or they remain – as with Grabbe’s term of *representational convergence* referring to the convergence of exterior and mental representations⁷ – closer to the realm of images whose unframing gives the beholder

5 L. C. Grabbe, “Homo Immergens: Immersion as a Parameter for a Media and Cultural Theory of Medial Hybridity,” in J. Bracker, A. Hubrich, eds., *The Art of Reception* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021): 400-422, 400.

6 Cfr. T. Ingold, “Drawing Together: Materials, Gestures, Lines,” in T. Otto, N. Bubandt, eds., *Experiments in Holism: Theory and Practice in Contemporary Anthropology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 299-313, 304-305.

7 Cfr. L. C. Grabbe, “Homo Immergens:” 400.

the feeling of being surrounded by them. This perspective on artificially spatialized images⁸ invites to focus on the transitions between images and illusionistic 3D-entities, and to a closer examination of the environmentalization inherent in it.

In the widely ramified discourse on environmentality, the art historical point of view still seems under-represented as far as the obvious link with the so-called *Ausstieg aus dem Bild*, with installation and site-related art is concerned. They equally mark a significant reference point for spatialization and meanwhile break down the status of art as distinct, object-like work. Instead, the art historical interrogation of environmentality has recently been deepened in reference back to screen media and the paradigm of projection: In her comprehensive study, Giuliana Bruno has illuminatingly interpreted the spatiality established by light projection in terms of materially transformative processes, transductive conversions of energy and the histories of energetic environments. But while she emphasizes the ambulatory “non-linear movement in forms of transduction”⁹ and explicitly investigates inhabitable spaces of immersion, with her focus on the act of projection, however, environmentality remains tied back to a transitive gesture of transmission and transport.¹⁰ In a broader disciplinary context, its exploration ranges from the new non-visual environments established by sensor technologies, from biologically, autopoietically or systems-theoretically conceptualized relations between an organism/a system and its *Umwelt*, to the environmental concerns of new materialism, anthropology and queer phenomenology, rewriting the Heideggerian irreducible world reference of the embodied self. Sara Ahmed’s approach is of particular interest here because it takes up the “bodily inhabitation of [...] space”¹¹

8 Cfr. J. Schröter, “Die Ästhetik der virtuellen Welt: Überlegungen mit Niklas Luhmann und Jeffrey Shaw,” in M. Bogen, R. Kuck, J. Schröter, eds., *Virtuelle Welten als Basistechnologie für Kunst und Kultur? Eine Bestandsaufnahme* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2015): 25-36.

9 G. Bruno, *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media* (Chicago-London: Chicago University Press, 2021): 109. See also *ibid.*: 111-112.

10 *Ibid.*: 2.

11 S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 6.

as a basic parameter of orientation, but in doing so opens up Heidegger's familiarity with the world to other directions and objects that were not always already at hand. Similarly, in Tim Ingold's anthropology, "joining with the togetherness of life"¹² as drawn lines serves a better understanding of the particular environmentality of the lifeworld. In the following, I propose to combine art historical thinking about site-related installation aesthetics with phenomenological and epistemological perspectives. They promise an understanding of bodily extension into space as an orientedness towards objects as well as towards others and simultaneously take account of an unstable objecthood. This offers an alternative way out of problematic dualistic premises that so far often separate art historical genealogies of immersion and debates on aesthetic experience from knowledge-historical considerations that see subject-object dichotomies undermined precisely by immersed bodies and their negotiation of environmental relations.¹³

As I want to show by analyzing two examples by Theodoulos Polyviou and Rosa Menkman, the de-differentiation between the work, its spatial surroundings and, by consequence, the exhibition display, is in particular renegotiated in recent VR-art. Its often closed imaginary worlds do not only present themselves as spatialized images, but simultaneously as an assemblage of things in space that reinforce the connection to installation art and display issues. As Christiane Paul remarked in 2003, VR does not only allow for the "full [...] immers[ion of] its users in a three-dimensional world generated by a computer" but also for "an interaction with the virtual objects that comprise that world."¹⁴ While the immersive environment thus means the withdrawal of the artwork as a singular (pictorial) object and counterpart of aesthetic experience, it simultaneously results in a multiplication of spatially arranged objects to which the visitor relates in an interactive, cognitive and – we might add – environmental or even (life) worldly way. This

12 T. Ingold, "Drawing together:" 303. See also *ibid.*: 301-304.

13 Cfr. D. Kasprovicz, *Der Körper auf Tauchstation*: 22, 24, 30.

14 C. Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003): 125.

ultimately leads to a multiplied nesting of work, environment and exhibition whose institutional and infrastructural conditions I will briefly consider at the end.

Normalized Immersion and the Epistemics of Virtual Objects and Spatialities

The recent VR-artworks of Polyviou and Menkman have been chosen for this study because, to some extent, they reinvest in immersive high-tech media arrangements similar to those of the 1990s and early 2000s. Cyprus-born artist Theodoulos Polyviou resorts to calculated 3D environments that reproduce existing spaces with architectural precision and make them individually explorable via head-mounted display (HMD) as well as on the desktop. Dutch artist and theorist Rosa Menkman uses the online walk-through spaces of the newart.city.org platform to host a collection of im/possible images in a specially designed artificial environment. At the same time, the two artists share the impulse to re-embed the virtual into a physical environment. Polyviou works with an elaborate recalibration of the virtual to the physical exhibition space, and Menkman reintegrates the interactive experience of the website into an exhibition design she creates, which in its own way restructures the physical space. This shared concern with relocalization hints at a contemporary understanding of immersion that does not privilege computer-generated simulated worlds. Doris Kolesch has summarized it as “an increasingly everyday interaction not only with digital media, but also and above all, with designed spaces and spaces of experience.”¹⁵ Indeed, this now normal immersive condition is also elaborated in terms of architectural and urban spaces that are in negotiation with images.¹⁶ However,

15 D. Kolesch, “Ästhetik der Immersion,” in G. W. Bertram, S. Deines, D. M. Feige, eds., *Die Kunst und die Künste: Ein Kompendium zur Kunsttheorie der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021): 422-441, 422 [my translation].

16 Cfr. L. Bieger, “Ästhetik der Immersion. Wenn Räume wollen. Immersives Erleben als Raumerleben,” in G. Lehnert, ed., *Raum und Gefühl. Der Spatial Turn und die neue Emotionsforschung* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag 2011): 75-95.

“immersion as factual state description,”¹⁷ may primarily end in a *World without Us*, as Inke Arns points out, where invisibly working smart technologies create non-delimited, post-visual environments. Does VR still play a significant part in such a ubiquitous immersion?

While on the one hand the selected artworks explore the “specific experience and mediality of the body-environment relationship”¹⁸ stressed by Kolesch, on the other hand, in unfolding a virtually walkable environment, they do not deny their rootedness in imagery and even expose their latent objecthood. They engage with environmental aesthetics by presenting themselves as an environment withholding any designated artwork or as a mere framework for other images. With the unstable references of their elements, they fully play out the role of virtual as epistemic objects and combine representation with operability. This approaches all the more the genre of knowledge exhibitions, as they invest in VR’s capacities of getting the user “immersed in reflection,”¹⁹ to quote Katja Kwastek’s term for reconciling the (inter)action-based mode of digital art with the traditionally contemplative aesthetic experience. Early installation art such as Lucio Fontana’s *Ambiente spaziale* already shows how physical spaces with the help of mirroring and lightning effects combine immersion with ontological speculation. Within VR-art, the latter is stimulated by oscillations between image and three-dimensionality. And it is intensified by virtual spatialities that similarly become a theoretical object of epistemic value, not only because of the heightened disorientation in spaces freed from physical regularity, but also as a result of more or less pure calculation. This affinity to abstraction mostly escapes the attention to hyperrealistic 3D-design and instead sometimes refers back to the sublime in art where natural phenomena fluidly transition into intangible abstract

17 I. Arns, “Qualityland, oder: Der Immersion begegnen,” Jahrbuch für Kulturpolitik, 2017/18: Welt. Kultur. Politik - Kulturpolitik in Zeiten der Globalisierung: 211-220, 212 [my translation].

18 D. Kolesch, “Ästhetik der Immersion:” 422.

19 K. Kwastek, “Immersed in Reflection? The Aesthetic Experience of Interactive Media Art,” in B. Dogramaci, F. Liptay, eds., *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media* (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016): 66-85.

emptiness. In 3D-environments, straight lines serve as generic framework of spaces, which, through texturing and mapping, also directly emerge from images.

Of particular interest is whether this linear abstractness is at the same time getting practicable in the course of the (manual) navigation through Polyviou's and Menkman's synthetic environments, enabled by the HMD with its tracking systems and hand-held controllers and by the maneuvers on the keyboard in the desktop-based versions. This passing through as the prevalent mode of VR-experience²⁰ can be further clarified by (queer-)phenomenological concepts of inhabiting space by taking directions and following lines, especially non-geometric entangled lines, giving high value to disorientation and turning toward objects as Sara Ahmed states.²¹ Insofar that this includes "lining ourselves up with the features of the grounds we inhabit, the sky that surrounds us, or the imaginary lines that cut through maps,"²² it already assumes a connection between physical, expressly natural and virtual spaces which extends up to technically-based environments. In a similar vein, Tim Ingold explicitly considers lines as basic element of immersion responsible for an embedding into the life-world. For him, coming to life results from being "immersed in those generative currents"²³ such as wind, for example, which also alters the state of man-made tools and technical objects transcending a purely transitive use. Thereby Ingold's concept of lines gains a potential for change and implies passages between the actual and the virtual.²⁴ With their help, he problematizes objects understood as "discrete, finished entities" which he judges as a mere obstacle for drawing and "designing environmental relations."²⁵ Lines,

20 I use the terms VR-experience, VR-environments and VR-works as broad concepts also including desktop-based virtual environments which have an immersive character on their own.

21 S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*: 1-2.

22 Ibid.: 6.

23 T. Ingold, "Drawing Together:" 305.

24 Ingold's repeated recourse to Deleuze/Guattari's concept of the line of flight (*ligne de fuite*) remains beyond the scope of this article, but is worth following in M. De Landa, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

25 T. Ingold, M. Anusas, "Designing Environmental Relations: From Opacity to Textility," *Design Issues* 29, no. 4 (2013): 58-69, 58.

in contrast, as exemplified by the inseparable correlation of a river and its banks, are emblematic of correspondences and engender a different kind of thinking: “to correspond with [the waters] is to join this awareness with the flow.”²⁶ They privilege an intransitive mode of “joining with” rather than “joining of.”

Putting VR-Art on Exhibition

When contemporary art today is testing the potentials of VR as an artistic medium, its borrowings from installation art are not exclusively motivated by the pragmatics of exhibiting in art museums. Many artists use this necessity for initiating ontological speculations on the continuum between virtual reality and the shared here and now in the museum. They intertwine the setting up of the interior pictorial world with the installative anchoring of the VR-experience in the exhibition space, thus producing their own form of potentiated environmentality connected to quite different strands of installative and site-related art. Here, only a brief comparison can point to how, in Banz & Bowinkel’s work *Mercury* (2017) (Fig. 1) for example, the filigree pavilion architecture that creates a second artificial habitat high above Planet Earth in the VR, extends into a metallic display for the processor and the second screen in the exhibition. And to another German VR-artist, Florian Meisenberg who chooses an illusionistic backdrop, as known from photo and film studios, to illusionistically embed the gesticulating wearer of the HMD into the abstract grid landscape of Superstudio’s 70s planetary architectural utopia. In both examples, the environments also serve to house other artworks. But instead of activating the institutional or archival concerns of installation art, they extend the artificially generated, often fictionalized world within the VR into the exhibition context which is more in line with the staging of illusionistic worlds by means of props in

²⁶ T. Ingold, *Knowing from the Inside: Correspondences*, (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 2017): 41.

cinema and cinematographic installation art. The VR-works by Polyviou and Menkman pursue the reverse path and thus tend to the originally anti-immersive institution-reflexive branch: Their freely designable VR-worlds conversely borrow from physical exhibition spaces and their conventions of presenting items of cultural value which is worth questioning as another symptom of immersive normality and life worldly virtuality.²⁷

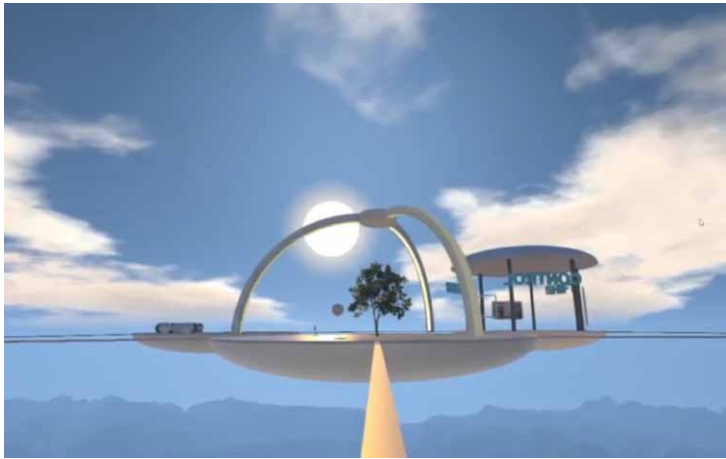


Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b

Fig. 1a and 1b. Banz & Bowinkel, *Mercury*, 2016. VR installation, screen capture and installation shot, DAM Gallery, Berlin, 2017. Courtesy of the artists.

Theodoulos Polyviou: *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising* (2021)

Besides the issues of art presentation in the pandemic, that influenced both selected artworks, I ask more generally about the role of environmental virtuality in Polyviou's and Menkman's action-based and visual-spatial strategies²⁸ of getting the recipient immersed in their work and thereupon re-perspectivize the question of institutional embedding. The first striking feature of *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising* created by Theodoulos Polyviou together with Eleni Diana Elia at the Centre for Art and Media, ZKM at Karlsruhe/Germany, is certainly the ground plan true modeling of a computer-generated world based on a specific location

27 Cfr. S. Rieger, A. Schäfer, A. Tuschling, eds., *Virtuelle Lebenswelten: Körper - Räume - Affekte* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

28 Kwastek stresses that the action-based experience not necessarily needs visual-spatial illusion (Cfr. "Immersed in Reflection?:" 69), but both aspects are closely united here.

within the museum. In summer 2021, visitors wearing HMD moved in situ through this doubled environment (Fig. 2-3). Since then, the work can be visited as only desktop-based VR on the online exhibition site *fantastic confabulations*, that reuses the digital replica of the space for further exhibitions.

Contrary to enabling “spatiotemporal transposition,” Polyviou uses VR for evoking a “hyper-awareness of the viewer as to where they are, and what they are doing.”²⁹ That’s why he is re-situating VR-technology by establishing site-related connections to architecturally and historically distinct places. But how is this intended sense of presence, which implies situatedness and agency, created in the site-specific VR-installation at the ZKM? In contrast to many other of his works,³⁰ any direct citation of a third auratic place and its cultural heritage is missing here. Polyviou obviously aims at the recognizability of the original museum space in 3D – the alignment of pillars typical of the former industrial building, the balustrade and the staircase leading to the open atrium as well as the glass partitions to the adjacent spaces are all faithfully reproduced. This makes the absence of the expected distinct artworks all the more noticeable. What one encounters inside, first of all appears as extensions of the serving architecture. The replicated pillars with spotlights are complemented by semicircular, half-height partitions as known from exhibition design. While these virtual supplements turn the clear cubic exhibition space into a cluttered and mysterious site, their freely curving floor plan lines reappear as vinyl stripes on the ground of the physical space.

29 Th. Polyviou in A. Urban, “Virtual Spaces for Transformative Encounters and Vast Reciprocity - An Interview with Theodoulos Polyviou and Jazmina Figueroa,” in L. Nolasco-Rózsás, ed., *Beyond Matter, Within Space: Curatorial and Art Mediation Techniques on the Verge of Virtual Reality* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2023): 429-443, 432.

30 See for example the installation *Transmundane Economies* (2022) at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, with references to the ruins of the Bellapais monastery in the north of Cyprus.



Fig. 2a



Fig. 2c



Fig. 2b



Fig. 2d

Fig. 2a, 2b, 2c and 2d T. Polyviou, *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising*, 2021. Site-specific VR installation, in cooperation with Eleni Diana Elia, installations shots and VR captures (details), ZKM, Karlsruhe 2021. Courtesy of the artists. © Eleni Diana Elia and Theodoulos Polyviou © Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (ZKM), photo by Tanja Meissner. Produced in the framework of the Beyond Matter Residency Program at ZKM | Karlsruhe.

This interplay between paradoxical emptiness and spatial density not only subverts the usual aesthetic experience in art museums with its orientation towards a singled-out art object. The directionality of the space image as an action image, theorized by Stephan Günzel in the context of gaming, where only objects centered in the field of vision can become the object of action,³¹ also remains unexploited. Instead, the environment privileges spatial exploration and confronts with the paradox physicality of its virtual architecture that, like the impermeable built world, diverts the users' bodies. Without any avatarial

31 Cfr. S. Günzel, "Vor dem Affekt: die Aktion - Emotion und Raumbild," in G. Lehnert, ed., *Raum und Gefühl: Der Spatial Turn und die neue Emotionsforschung* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2014): 63-74, 67-68.

representation, their self-perception entirely depends on bodily correlations with the labyrinthine environment, that additionally applies sensory stimuli and atmospheric immersion³² including artificial billowing fog on the floor, a sound backdrop and hall lights converted into dramatic illuminations. Thus, the functional architecture that subliminally remains perceptible through its calibration with the virtual space, shifts to a fictionalized, suspenseful backdrop that awaits its narration. Priority has the increased intensity of experience typical for spatial-immersive installations and one-sided de-distancing. But the artificial environment here also requires an action- and reflection-based attitude thanks to the latency of its speculative and operable objects and thus enacts a highly sensuous, performative form of site-related institutional critique. This comes into action when the foggy atmosphere transforms the built-in walls into jagged rock formations, thereby unifying different materialities in one unstable image-object, or when the flashing spotlights and the variable angle of view instantly turn a black surface into a three-dimensional hide-away (Fig. 3).

In addition, the windows that in fact only separate the next exhibition space, virtually open onto an equally artificial purple exterior, imitating a dramatic skylight. Its emptiness suspends the virtual exhibition space with its balustrades and staircase in an indefinite void, so that the emphasized inside-outside difference gives this VR-topos of floatation an institution-critical side. While Polyviou's environment is housed/hosted by the museum, it also nests there as an invisible counter-place that virtually undermines the physicality of the institution.³³ And by penetrating the interior of the virtual environment, the shadows of the grid windows cite the linear structure of computed space. But this space loses the evenness secured by optical projection when the grid lines synthesize the floor with the pillars to one continuous surface. It thus foreshadows a virtual

32 Cfr. also R. Eugeni, G. Raciti, eds., "Atmosfere mediali," *VCS Visual Culture Studies. Rivista semestrale di cultura visuale*, no. 1 (November 2020).

33 Cfr. Th. Polyviou in A. Urban, "Virtual Spaces for Transformative Encounters and Vast Reciprocity:" 430.

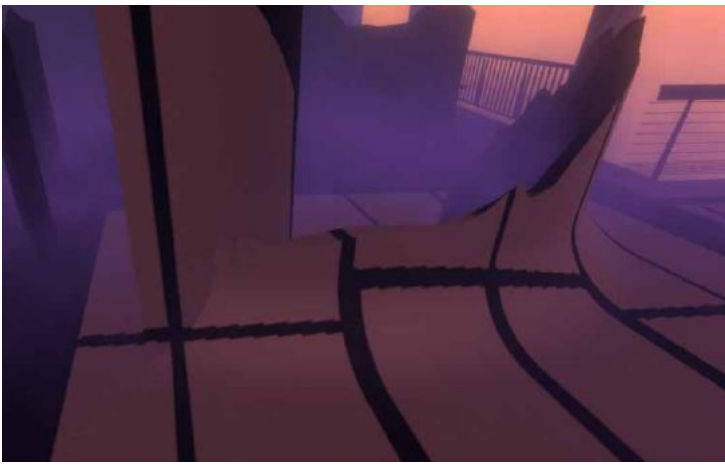


Fig. 3a

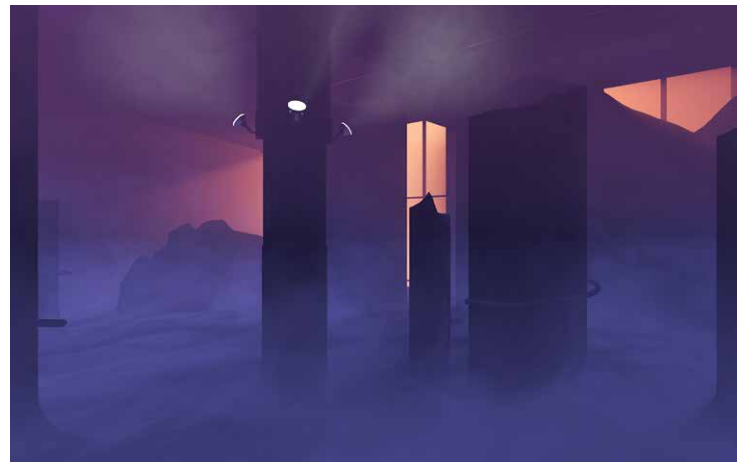


Fig. 3c



Fig. 3b

Fig. 3a, 3b and 3c T. Polyviou, *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising*, 2021. Site-specific VR installation, in cooperation with Eleni Diana Elia, VR captures (details), ZKM, Karlsruhe 2021. Courtesy of the artists. © Eleni Diana Elia and Theodoulos Polyviou © Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (ZKM), Produced in the framework of the Beyond Matter Residency Program at ZKM | Karlsruhe.

substantiality beyond the clear differentiation of distinct things and deprived of the stability of usual grounds.

This exacerbates the insecurity of the orientation-seeking users who navigate their invisible body through the confusing narrowness of fixtures, pseudo-functional handrails and hall lights. However, this staged reduction of distance is not simply overwhelming. The ambiguous virtual objects also ensure that, by “gather[ing] on the ground,” – as Sara Ahmed has noted – “they create a ground upon which we can gather.”³⁴ Indeed, the mixed environment unites online as well as HMD users whose actions in the physical terrain marked with stripes are simultaneously observed by the museum visitors. Even without direct references to sacred architecture, Polyviou thus links the

³⁴ S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*: 1.

VR-typical passing through with a quasi-ritualized use of space. Alison Griffith has already tied back a counter-history of immersive spectatorship in the museum not only to the panorama, science museum, and planetarium, but also to the cathedral.³⁵ In *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising*, mnemonic mental images ensure the combination of action-based with cognitive immersion, because the disoriented wandering takes place through the comparison of constantly shifting, remembered spaces. When Polyviou decisively theorizes this ritualization as base for a “queer togetherness,”³⁶ this reconnects to the lines printed on the floor. Through their interference with the dense environment inside the VR, they emancipate themselves from the clear legibility as object contour and ground plan. They thus contribute to the crucial entanglement that, according to Ingold, gets the “living being [...] as a bundle of [the] lines”³⁷ of its movement immersed in its lifeworld. Polyviou therefore stimulates bodily practices of losing oneself in artificially induced passions. The choreographed searching movements inside give the museum space an improvisational openness, while the calibration with the physical pillars and ground makes the VR-experience literally tangible. Environmental immersion here goes hand in hand with a reduction of difference that de-differentiates virtual and physical spaces, bodies and objects.

Rosa Menkman: *The BLOB of Im/Possible Images* (2021)

Rosa Menkman’s VR-experience also brings the categories of artwork and exhibition nearly into congruence. But, instead of eliminating distinct artworks, Menkman, for this purpose, departs from a veritable collection assembled under the title of *Im/Possible Images* (Fig. 4). She stores

35 Cfr. A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

36 “Drifting, Browsing, Cruising,” *Fantastic Confabulations*, <https://fantastic-confabulations.beyondmatter.eu/driftng-browsing-cruising/index.html>, accessed December 29, 2022.

37 T. Ingold, “Drawing Together:” 300.

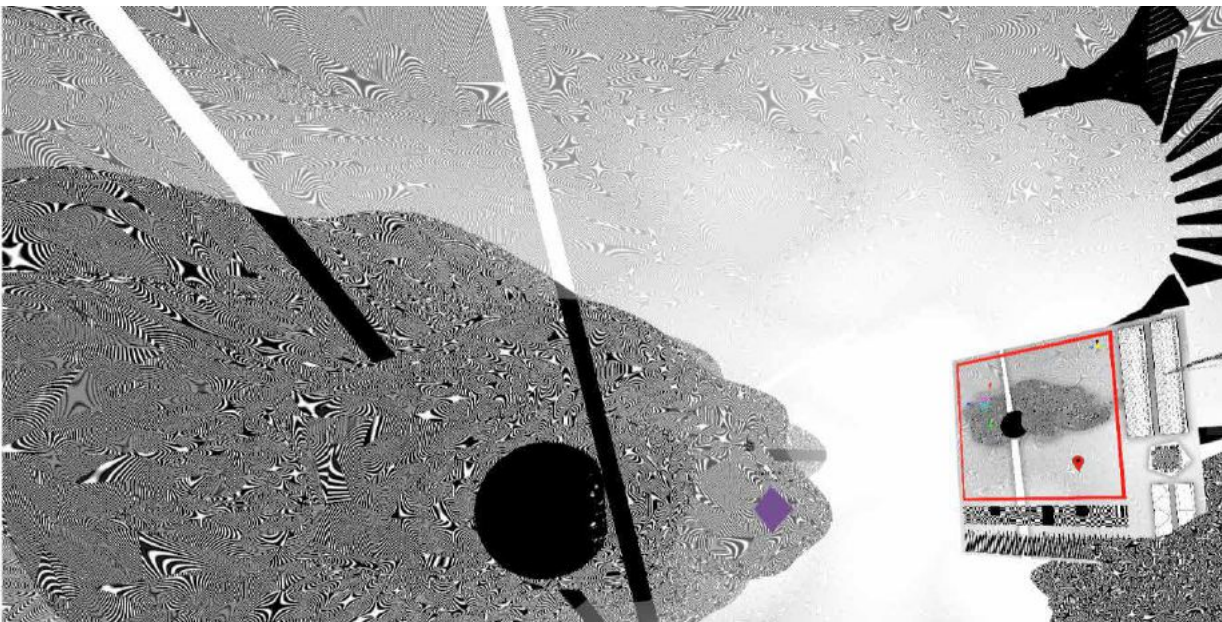


Fig. 4

Fig. 4. R. Menkman, *The BLOB of Im/possible Images*, 2021. Desktop-based virtual environment, accessible on the platform *New Art City*. Courtesy of the artist.

this collection on the widely used VR-art platform *New Art City* where she designed a complex desktop-based virtual environment that shows an enclosed grayish scenery with a staircase, a huge resolution-chart, a humanoid figure and a second free-floating structure pierced by diagonals. Initially hidden from view, the collected images are sheltered inside this amorphous cloud, revealing themselves when one navigates through the permeable sheathing. The nested structure alludes to the titular BLOB with its polysemy of digital blob architecture, the single-celled, ‘intelligent’ super-organism and Binary Large Objects as a technical term for databased image processing. And the exhibits that visitors have to deal with in this environment are mainly objects of knowledge accessible only through representation, so a reference to their theorizations by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger and Susan Leigh Star/John Griesemer is suggested.³⁸ Menkman thus borrows from the realm of scientific images, which has been a central field of debate and self-definition for digital art from the very beginning. She delegates the act of imagining and selecting them by realizing a survey during her Arts at Cern/Collide Barcelona-Residency, asking the researchers what image of a relevant object or

38 Cfr. G. Roßler, *Der Anteil der Dinge an der Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2015): 19-58.

phenomenon they would capture if “limits of spatial, temporal, energy, signal/noise or cost resolutions”³⁹ were irrelevant. In other words, this variability of resolution results in products of imagineering and touches on phenomena that are decoupled from humans’ experience, escaping their commonly perceived environmentalities. But these phenomena can be mediated by virtual body-environment relations, which conversely force a changed understanding of (aesthetic) experience, as discussed by Roberto Diodato with reference to John Dewey.⁴⁰ The choice of the nuclear physicists as experts in im/possible images endow the virtual as epistemic objects with a specific latency and scientificity. The referents of their proposed images mostly elude the objecthood familiar to mankind and have nothing in common with the medium-sized “things of the earth’s surface” as characterized by the Gestalt psychologist Fritz Heider.⁴¹

Two important aspects shared with Polyviou’s example promise additional insights into the workings of environmental immersion. Firstly, this concerns the embedding into abstractness, which goes along with a space that loses its conventional categories and thus favors immersion through the withdrawal of the usual parameters of orientation. This not only stems from the arbitrary laws of physicality in VR, but also from a different kind of world reference in ‘virtual bodies environments’, which Diodato emphasizes: “In this intermediary world space itself is the result of interactivity.”⁴² In Menkman’s case, the intensified experience is generated not so much by a condensed, labyrinthine spatiality as by the enhanced self-reflexivity of navigation itself. Both, the VR-environment *The BLOB of Im/Possible Images* and the related video-work *Whiteout* showing a tour in Harz mountains in heavy snow, deal with the experience in a markerless space tending to exceed human

39 R. Menkman, “The BLOB of Im/possible Images”

<https://newart.city/show/menkman-blob-of-im-possibilities>, accessed December 30, 2022.

40 Cfr. R. Diodato, *Image, Art and Virtuality: Towards an Aesthetics of Relations* (Cham: Springer, 2021): 56.

41 Cited after G. Roßler, *Der Anteil der Dinge an der Gesellschaft*: 38.

42 R. Diodato, *Image, Art and Virtuality*: 61.

senses and erase most thingness. Second, the comparison with *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising* is based on the re-physicalization of the VR-works in the exhibition format. Rosa Menkman conceived a carefully designed exhibition display for a 2021 group show at Munich where she reconnected the VR-experience to the physical space with the help of lines. While in Polyviou's example the plotting of isomorphic virtual and physical elements onto a planimetric floor plan retains a relative object character, Menkman starts from abstract lines as axes of graphs and coordinate systems. They guide the exploration of the virtual world inside and also mark the thresholds of iconic representation. Touching on signal spectra, digital states and im/material energetic flows, they bring forth what Ingold sees otherwise negated by the regime of solidified things.

Within the VR, the resolution chart erected next to the figurine is particularly telling of how Menkman translates resolution into space, taking advantage of the orthogonality of digital as "rasterized [...] images" based on a "grid of picture elements or pixels,"⁴³ that, according to Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini, also possess a specific plasticity. By mapping the gray structure of the internal blob with the diagonals and its one black anchor point, the resolution chart pretends to guide the VR-user searching to enter this enclosure. Yet, despite the lines piercing the amorphous volume, the chart does not reveal any information about the interior. The charted scales and frequency ranges unmistakably mark this second blob as an image-object of the same digital fabric as the abstractly textured body of the figurine besides, Menkman's *Angelus Novus* emblematic for the reversal of gaze regimes. This co-presence of image-objects and -subjects made of distorted black-white stripes strongly signals the de-differentiation of most diverse entities. The appearance of the things is flexibilized to such a degree that their self-identity

43 F. Casetti, A. Somaini, "Resolution: Digital Materialities, Thresholds of Visibility," *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 7, no. 1 (2018): 87-103.

is disposable and their recognition depends on the user's bodily action (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5a

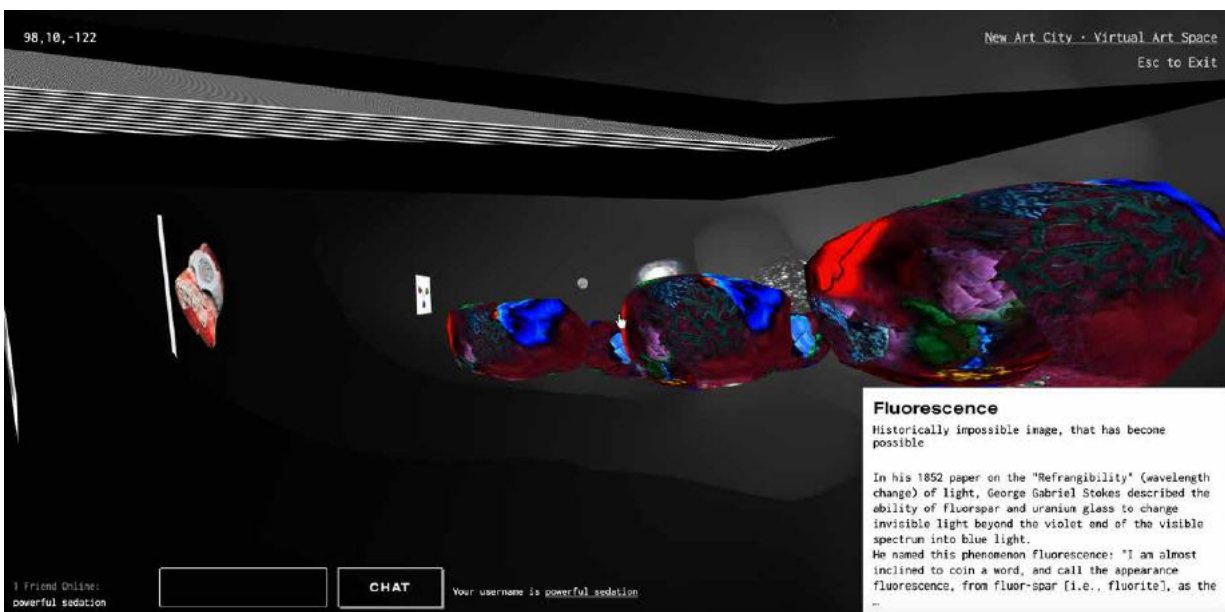


Fig. 5b

Fig. 5a and Fig. 5b .R. Menkman, *The BLOB of Im/possible Images*, 2021, Desktop-based virtual environment, accessible on the platform *New Art City*, screenshots by the author. Courtesy of the artist.

As soon as the user has traversed the opaque but permeable grayish membrane of the blob, the environment transforms into a dark sphere with mystic sound where the im/possible images are scattered in an unmeasurable distance. When the wandering user is attracted by small luminous dots that, up close, turn out to represent the *Pale Blue Dot* aka Planet Earth, taken by Voyager 1 in 1990 for example, or a *Quantum Vacuum*, quarks inside of a proton, a shadow of a black hole and a body scan of the interior of a wrist, she/he is once again less guided by the affordances of gaming. To remind Günzel, its “fixed-paranoid perspective” turns objects into action carriers by shifting them to the center of the image; but here, only the paranoid dimension of permanent searching seems to endure “through which the objects in the virtual off must be transferred into actualization.”⁴⁴ As Roberto Diodato notes with reference to Bernard Stiegler and Richard Grusin, in view of the prevailing premediation techniques and an already thoroughly hypermediated world, it is necessary for the techno-artistic creation of virtual spacetime environments to break the merely adaptive behavior pattern of supposedly active cognitive agents.⁴⁵ Beyond the gaming attitude running into the void, it is the habits of museum spectators that help surprisingly well – right down to the work texts that pop up on approach. But, of course, the concept of the mimetic image is challenged here by the assembled nuclear- and astrophysical phenomena at the limits of what can still be captured by light or other wavelengths. Menkman succeeds in staging the uncertain status of such objects of knowledge, which only move into the rank of the existent through new technologies of detection, by making use of the peculiarities of virtual objecthood. This starts with the all-round perspectivability and resulting form variance of the virtual exhibits already known from sculpture, joined here by their free scalability and permeability

44 S. Günzel, “Vor dem Affekt:” 68.

45 Cfr. R. Diodato, *Image, Art and Virtuality*: 64-65.

in direct interaction with the user navigating their invisible bodies through space. The skinned wrist, for example, hits the viewer in powerful plasticity or just hangs in space as flatware, depending on the point of entry into the enclosure of the im/possible images, the viewing angle and proximity to the item. This form of distance reduction self-reflexively combines seeing and (inter-)acting. The less complete immersion of desktop-based VR is compensated for by the tactility of maneuvering with arrow keys or touchpad, which transfers its sensation of handling to the virtual objects. Menkman experiments here with re-introducing into art the more immersive displays of the natural history museum,⁴⁶ whose never-broken connection to science is recalled by Christiane Voss' reflections on the medium of exhibition,⁴⁷ and appropriates the knowledge exhibition format. In this setting, barely tangible phenomena such as black holes, dark matter and other galaxies become manageable as in a laboratory that, in terms of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, only brings epistemic things into existence.⁴⁸

The nested spatial structure of the BLOB increases this epistemic valence because it invites for repeating those transformative immersive crossings from one internal sphere to the next. Outside the encapsulated image collection, the latency of objects is provided by the polygon meshes patterned with black/whites lines reminiscent of military dazzle camouflage⁴⁹ that acts as de-distancing tool precisely by preventing its correct estimation. Instead of simulating natural light conditions, as it often serves to catalyze the atmospheric immersion of a perfected VR, the moiré reveals another form of apparitional fluidity. Constantly changing with the user's movement, the texture shows a pulsating im/materiality that already withdraws at the surface. It seems close to Ingold's and Anusas's notion of infrastice that includes "all manner of electrical,

46 Cfr. A. Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine*.

47 Cfr. C. Voss, "Das Museum als Medium der Kunst," in G. W. Bertram, S. Deines, D. M. Feige, eds., *Die Kunst und die Künste: Ein Kompendium zur Kunsttheorie der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021): 464-483, 474.

48 Cfr. G. Roßler, *Der Anteil der Dinge an der Gesellschaft*: 35.

49 My thanks go to Manuel van der Veen for this reference and the exchange about the text.

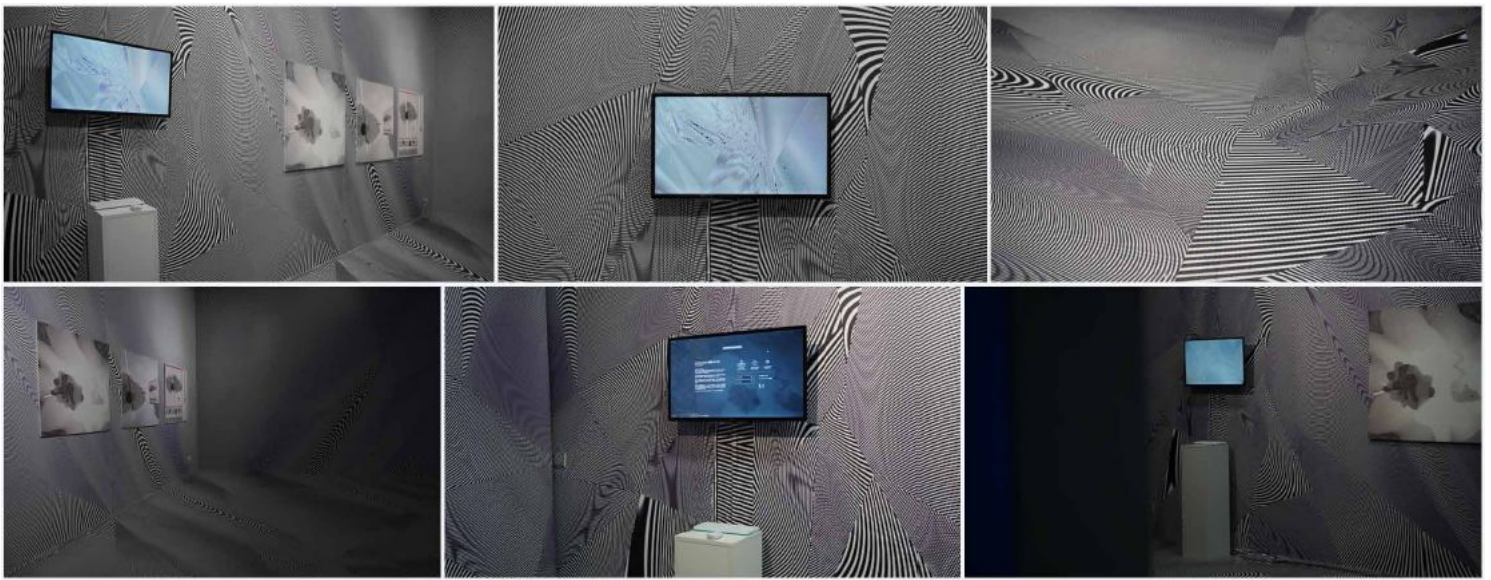


Fig. 6 R. Menkman, *The Im/possible BLOB*, 2021. Installed at Temporal Stack: the Deep Sensor in Guizhou, China, curated by Iris Long und HE Zike, 2021. Courtesy of the Artist.

chemical, and mechanical workings [...], energies, gases, and fluids”⁵⁰ and resists the useability of surfaces solely understood as interfaces.

Finally, the artist also uses these textures, as well as the abstract lines of graphs as vehicle for transferring the virtual into physical space. For a presentation of *The BLOB* at Gizhou/China (Fig. 6), the dynamic black/white pattern has been transformed into a wallpaper. This exhibition design attaches more to the cinematically inspired strategy of extending the fictional-scenic image space inside the VR into an overall immersive installation. But there, without the operability of latent virtual objects, it tends to unrealize the museum with its psychotic pattern. In contrast, for a group exhibition in Munich that combined the VR-experience and the video *Whiteout* with works by Memo Akten, Susan Schuppli and others, Menkman materialized the abstract lines from inside the BLOB (Fig. 7). They established a 3D-framework in physical space whose white, green, red, yellow and blue diagonals traversed the floor and walls of the exhibition hall,⁵¹ thus slightly removing it from orthogonality. As these lines are imagined to shift the

50 T. Ingold, M. Anusas, “Designing Environmental Relations:” 58.

51 Cfr. L. Gross, R. Menkman, *L 13: Reader NR 4 im/possible images* (München: Lothringer 13 Halle, 2022) https://beyonddresolution.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/Catalogues%2Fimpossible_L13_READER.pdf, accessed April 25, 2023.

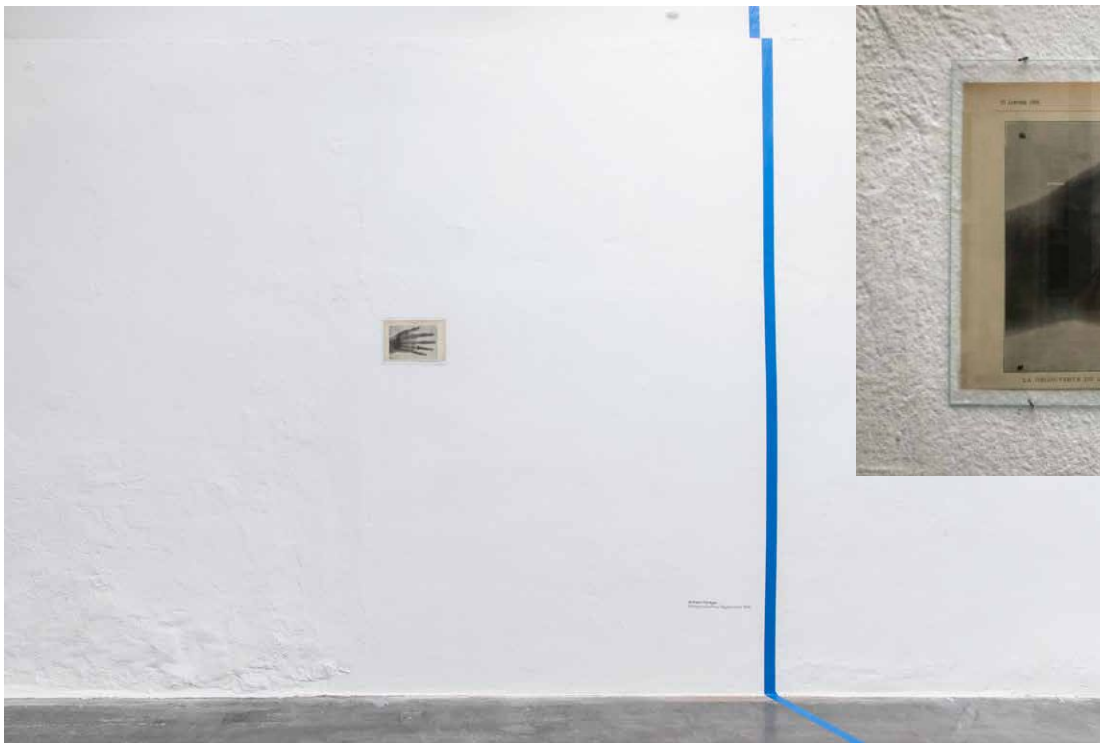


Fig. 7b



Fig. 7d

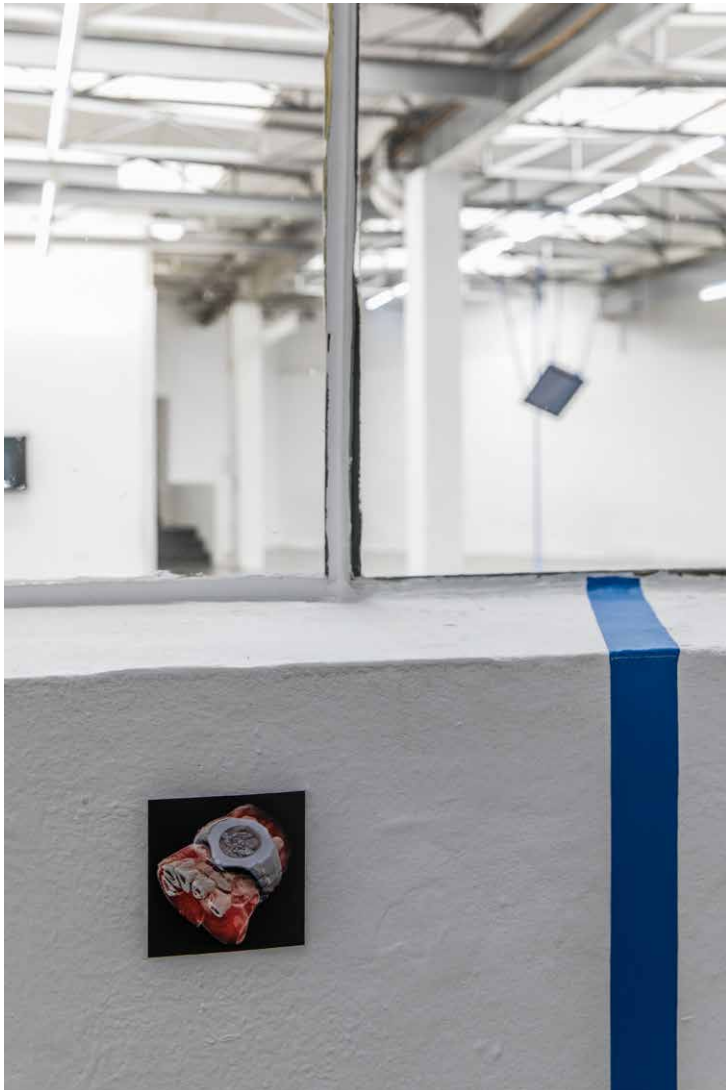


Fig. 7a



Fig. 7c

Fig. 7 a-d. Views of the Exhibition *Im/possible Images*, at the Lothringer 13 Halle, Munich, 2021, curated by Rosa Menkman. Photo by Dominik Gigler. Courtesy of the artist and of Lothringer 13 Halle.

spectra of resolution – a borderline to “low fidelity images” was inscribed on the floor –, the artist transformed the built into a “latent image space.”⁵² Similar to the VR, I would add, the solidity of its objects becomes doubtful, when variable parameters of the perceptible and representable always help other visualities and entities to emerge. With this kind of environmentalization, Menkman de-hierarchizes an ever-higher resolution, that regulates access to more and more details and therefore, according to Casetti and Somaini, raises the power question of control.⁵³ In the Munich exhibition, some of the im/possible images from the BLOB (re-)materialized as exhibits, among them a photo of the skinned hand scan or a newspaper clipping with an x-rayed hand from 1896. But, by placing them along the resolution lines, these factual images remain suspended in an abstract space of potentialities. In sum, the exhibition display was activated as an integral component not principally distinguished from what is constitutive for the ‘work.’

Potentiated Environmentalization

As shown so far, the multiplication of environments inherent in VR-art results from its genuine blurring of the differences between work and environment. This generative logic of further nesting necessarily brings the whole institutional and curatorial ecosystem of VR-art into view. And the extension of the internal installation aesthetics not only counteracts its technically-based encapsulation. It is also essential for not missing the togetherness⁵⁴ – to cite Mieke Bal – of an exhibition which, according to Christiane Voss, is the medium that establishes the works’ mode of existence as art in the first place.⁵⁵

The Blob of Im/Possible Images, commissioned by the HeK Basel, was produced with the infrastructure of newart.city.org that provides a “virtual exhibition toolkit”

52 Cfr. R. Menkman, “Im/possible Images@Lothringer 13, Munich” <https://beyondresolution.info/im-possible-images-1>, accessed December 29, 2022.

53 Cfr. F. Casetti, A. Somaini, “Resolution:” 89.

54 Cfr. M. Bal, *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020).

55 Cfr. Voss, “Das Museum als Medium der Kunst:” 464.

with “built-in tools to manage artworks and space layouts.”⁵⁶ Menkman takes up its claims for a non-hierarchical co-creation and invites the submission of further non-expert impossible images. Later on, the work has been embedded into a virtual, but spatial exhibition curated by Livia Nolasco-Rózsás and Giulia Bini for the ZKM in 2021, which pushes the tendencies towards nesting and de-differentiation even further: *Spatial Affairs. Worlding* is inhabited by artworks, an exhibition display and visitors sharing the same organic-abstract shape. One can only distinguish the non-humanoid avatars of other visitors from exhibits through distance-reduction and the object-related action of a mouse click. The latter then turn into pink and, via an info window and links, lead the web-user to the works stored on artists’ website or platforms. By interpreting environmentalization in terms of worlding, the curators participate in the posthumanist renewal of the phenomenological critique of the world as sum of objects. The multi-user online world with its identical, modular entities first hides the exhibition behind the supposed affordances of gaming and chats. However, the transitions between the environmental exhibition and environmental works are designed less immersively – like portals in gaming or falling down the rabbit-hole known from literature – than through paratextual framings operated by non-natural manual interfaces.

The online exhibition site *fantastic confabulations* that hosts *Drifting, Browsing, Cruising* was also conceived by Polyviou together with Jasmina Figueora as artists in residence of the same research project *Beyond Matter*. Instead of nesting spaces, it deals with the generic, serial tendency of self-continuation by inviting to reuse the initial 3D-reconstruction of the ZKM balcony for subsequent projects such as realized by Figueora who modeled her spoken words and sound scores by the visitors’ movements through the virtual site. Following Ahmed, this

56 Cfr. “About New Art City,” <https://info.newart.city/about>, accessed December 28, 2022.

implies not only a model for self-determined curation, but also a form of environmental co-habitation.

Lívia Nolasco-Rózsás argues for the museum in the virtual condition as a “cognitive system”⁵⁷ including non-human actors, thereby reaccentuating the pioneering thought exhibitions [*Gedankenausstellungen*] initiated by Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour. Polyviou’s example gets by without its strong archival underpinning. In the functional architecture, his staging of an atmospherically condensed counterworld aims at releasing a different bodily knowledge of possible encounters and envisions a counter-physicality for transcending the otherwise hard-to-move institution. The curved lines on the ground echoing the paths inside the VR offer their own transformative knowledge of entanglement that is experienced and produced environmentally. In comparison, Menkman directly invests into the potential of virtual as epistemic and aesthetic objects. Their *robustness* and simultaneously *plasticity* reminds the capability of Star’s and Griesemer’s boundary objects to make agents of different groupings,⁵⁸ in this case those of art and science, meet. What Doris Kolesch has in mind with a normalized immersion in not only technologically-enclosed but everyday spaces, can also be true for VR-based environmentalization. De-differentiation and de-distancing are then not contradictions to but catalysts of immersive reflection.

57 L. Nolasco-Rózsás, Y. Hofmann, “The Museum as a Cognitive System of Human and Non-Human Actors,” *The Garage Journal: Studies in Art, Museums & Culture*, no. 3 (2021): 1-15.

58 Cfr. G. Roßler, *Der Anteil der Dinge an der Gesellschaft*: 33-34.

Immersivity as An-immersivity



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Abstract

The title of this project, “An-icon,” refers to “images that deny themselves.” Virtual reality may be viewed as a typical, though not exclusive, case able to illustrate this kind of image: we know we have crossed the threshold of an environment that consists of images (ontologically), but we experience it (phenomenologically) as if it were a real environment. Something similar can be said about immersivity, but reversing the perspective: we are (ontologically) immersed in reality (virtual or non-virtual), but (phenomenologically) we know and say we are, and for this very reason we reject the idea that we are *simply* immersed in an environment.

This applies first and foremost to our experience in general, regardless of the status of the experiences we gain through virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) or mixed reality (MR).

And yet, within this very general condition, human beings have over time created environments and works that carve out zones of “special immersivity,” so to speak, *dedicated* to immersion. What are we looking for in VR immersivity? Are new immersive technologies merely refinements of older techniques, or can they affect our relationship with ourselves, reality, and others in novel ways? What are artistic practices called on to do when faced with such new technological practices?

Keywords

[Ordinary and immersive experience](#) [Virtual reality and art](#)

[Experience economy](#)

[Control](#)

[Uncontrollability](#)

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An-Immersivity

The title of this project, “An-icon,” refers to “images that deny themselves.” Virtual reality may be viewed as a typical, though not exclusive, case able to illustrate this kind of image: we know we have crossed the threshold of an environment that consists of images (ontologically), but we experience it (phenomenologically) as if it were a real environment. Something similar can be said about immersivity, but reversing the perspective: we are (ontologically) immersed in reality (virtual or non-virtual), but (phenomenologically) we know and say we are, and for this very reason we reject the idea that we are *simply* immersed in an environment. If we were, we would have no way of becoming aware of this. In fact, to speak of immersivity, we must find our balance on an unstable boundary, which allows us to recognize the encompassing and intrascendible character of immersive experience while at the same time belying its closure, piercing it from within. To speak of immersivity therefore implies recognizing that one is in a condition of “an-immersivity,” where the hyphen separating and joining the privative prefix “an” to “immersivity” is the sign of a paradox. It could also be said that the hyphen evokes the figure of an unstable threshold, referring to the co-presence of inside and outside.¹ This applies first and foremost to our experience in general, regardless of the status of the experiences we gain through virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) or mixed reality (MR).

“Special immersivity”

Before even considering the complexities and opportunities of virtual immersivity, it should be noted that

¹ In this I am comforted by the title of A. Pinotti’s fine book, *Alla soglia dell’immagine: Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021).

immersivity presents itself first and foremost as a feature of our being in the world: we are always already immersed in experience, in a given situation part of an indeterminate totality. Where else could we be? And yet, within this very general condition, human beings have over time created environments and works that carve out zones of “special immersivity,” so to speak, *dedicated* to immersion, with different modalities, complexities, techniques, functions, and meanings, many of which – the earliest – tend to be beyond our understanding and perhaps always will.

Is it possible that the insistent recourse to “(special) immersivity” arises especially at times of deep crisis, when the very foundations of a civilization are felt to be uncertain, invested with a high rate of contingency?² To simplify: since forms of life do not allow us to feel at home in this world, which seems to have become foreign, indecipherable and threatening, one is drawn to limited and controlled spaces in which to immerse oneself, to feel more alive and safe, at least for a while. I think this perspective is plausible, though it is partial and, indeed, a simplification. What else are we looking for in VR immersivity? Are new immersive technologies merely refinements of older techniques, or can they affect our relationship with ourselves, reality, and others in novel ways? What are artistic practices

2 O. Grau, *From Illusion to Immersion* (2001), trans. G. Custance (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003) offers a historical survey of artworks aimed at providing immersive experiences. In recent decades, however, interest in Paleolithic and “cave art” has been rekindled outside the circle of specialists as well, both as such – see, e.g., G. Rigal, *Le temps sacré des cavernes* (Paris: Corti, 2016) – and in relation to contemporary art, to this regard see again Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell’immagine* (especially the section on “Avatāra” in ch. V). Cfr. also M. Stavrini, *Saisis par la préhistoire: Enquête sur l’art et le temps des modernes* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2019) and in particular the pages devoted to Frederick Kiesler’s *Endless House* and Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio’s *Caverna dell’antimateria*. Both of these works, created in the late 1950s, reflect the anguish connected to the atomic bomb, at that time perceived as a looming threat, later forgotten but always resurgent. The short-circuit between contemporary art and the Paleolithic seems to be related to the perception of a profound change in a civilization, if not its end, and thus to a need to revisit its origins, as if one had to start over. In this regard, in addition to a number of works of visual art that explicitly harken back to the Paleolithic, see also Richard Powers’ symptomatic novel *Plowing the Dark* (2000), which I have analyzed in S. Velotti, “Art in the time of Pandemic: Three Terms,” *Paradigmi* 39, no. 1 (2021): 127-140.

called on to do when faced with such new technological practices?

Nowadays the adjective “immersive” is used obsessively in the presentation of theme parks and other sensational “adventures” or “experiences” that promise to take us “inside” paintings and frescoes or into physically inaccessible places. The word invariably appears in the press releases of museums, exhibitions, performances, installations, but also in advertisements for apartments for sale or wine and food itineraries.³ One way to understand the meaning of the word is “proof of the opposite:” what, for example, would a “non-immersive” visit to an apartment look like? Hard to answer, unless we specify restrictive conditions for what is meant by immersivity. Used loosely, however, “immersive” risks being meaningless since its negation does not seem to change anything. And yet it is precisely for this reason that it is an enigmatic adjective, hovering like an obscure object of desire in our social imagination.

Are we therefore to conclude that the attribution of immersivity is in vain since it neither adds nor detracts from the characterization of experience? I don’t think so. However, we must first clarify in what sense each of our experiences is both immersive and non-immersive, or, indeed, “an-immersive.” On this basis it will be easier to ask what peculiar traits are offered by the different uses of “special immersivity,” by this form of reality that is VR, particularly in relation to art, which, if it is anything, is a way of understanding how we place ourselves in the world.

³ A real estate agency in Rome advertises its luxurious apartments in the Parioli district with the following words, “Enjoy an immersive experience! Come visit your new home.” The real estate company is called Pitagora because it is located near Piazza Pitagora, not because it is referencing the Greek philosopher; however, the agency’s slogan is “Pitagora – the philosophy of living.” Which, supposedly, explains its “unique and iconic character.” As for food and wine itineraries, one can visit, for example, “The Temple of Brunello” in Montalcino (Tuscany), which actually offers “a station with VR viewers called InVolo” that “allows visitors to immerse themselves in the villas, castles, vineyards and hamlets that dot the municipality’s vast and diversified area,” <https://www.rodimontalcino.it/tempio-del-brunello/>, accessed December 24, 2022.

Fish and amphibians

At first glance, one would be tempted to say that we human animals are like fish immersed in water – to quote a famous apologue by David Foster Wallace about the difficulty of grasping the medium in which we are immersed: an old fish asks two young fish, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” and they in turn ask themselves, “What the hell is water?”⁴ The element in which we are immersed is in this sense a medium that cannot be iconized or represented. In one respect, it is undeniable that we are always already situated, immersed in a concrete environment that resists iconic reduction. On the other hand, one must ask whether asserting this undeniable condition of immersion does not imply a partial denial of it.

The simplest critiques of a representational model of the mind often target a naive idea of representation, one that can be imagined as a frame or filter interposed between us and things, constituted by the spatio-temporal forms of intuition or by a priori categories, universal or culturally determined conceptual schemes. Access to reality “in itself” is therefore denied to us, because according to this account reality is always filtered through (inter)subjective lenses. On the complementary plane of our actions and productions we have mental representations enclosed in our head that we then try to externalize, technically, artistically or in other ways.

Various versions of enactivism oppose this view of the representational mind, rightly insisting that perception is an active way of exploring the material and social environment in which we are immersed, of experiencing affordances and building skills, not a way of corresponding

⁴ D. Foster Wallace, *This is Water*, 2005. Commencement speech to the graduating class at Kenyon College, <https://fs.blog/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>, accessed December 28, 2022.

more or less correctly to an already organized world.⁵ Not least because, in order to see whether our representations “correspond” to the world, we would need to be able to have unfiltered access to reality. On another front, anti-representationalism is also endorsed by those who replace representations with immanent flows and forces, or who propose that we think of ourselves as “things among things,” according to a “flat ontology” devoid of anthropocentric hierarchies, where all entities are equally agents and patients, from stones to plants, from artifacts to animals.

Yet, both the idea of a representational filter and the various versions of absolute immersivity run into the same problem: if we think these ideas and formulate them linguistically, as in fact we do, then they are self-contradictory. If they are true, then they are false.⁶ For if we experienced the world through a filter, we would have to see the world, ourselves and the filter with a view from nowhere. And if on the other hand it were true, as in some ways *it is* true, that we are always immersed in a translucent medium like fish in water, we could not communicate this. We would just be immersed. The fact is that we discover ourselves immersed and emerged at the same time, more amphibian than fish. We realize that we see and do not see a frame, that we remain on this side of a threshold *knowing that we cannot cross it and therefore crossing it.*⁷ Toward where? Toward an infinitely expandable context, the indeterminable totality of every possible experience in which

5 Cfr. J. Stewart, O. Gapenne, E. A. Di Paolo, *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). For a recent survey of enactivism in relation to cultural contexts see C. Durt, T. Fuchs, C. Tewes, eds., *Embodiment, Enaction, and Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017).

6 Here I broadly trace the exposition of the paradoxes of experience articulated by E. Garroni, *Estetica: Uno sguardo-atraverso* (Milan: Garzanti, 1992).

7 Christian Stiegler acknowledges the liminality of the “liquid spaces” in which we are immersed, but then seems to unilaterally emphasize the disappearance of all frames: “Liquid spaces are moments of uncertainty, instability, and fluidity in mediated experiences. They emerge as thresholds between the physical and the mediated. These spaces create the feeling of immersion even beyond the mediation by eliminating critical distance and dissolving the frames of media.” C. Stiegler, *The 360° Gaze: Immersions in Media, Society, and Culture* (London: MIT Press, 2021): 61.

we are already included, on whose horizon this determinate experience stands, which is such precisely insofar as it is “cut out” from that indeterminate and uncontrollable horizon of possibility.

What McLuhan says about medial awareness – summarized in the famous “rearview-mirror” metaphor recalled by Pinotti – is therefore not entirely true:

As long as s/he is immersed in a medium, the human being is as little aware of it as the fish of the water in which he swims. Only the moment that medium is overtaken by a later medium can it be retrospectively focused on and grasped precisely as the medium in which the experience had been organized: “we are always one step behind in our view of the world.”⁸

We do not need the appearance of another medium to know that we are not like fish in water: the possibility of saying that we are is enough for us to prove ourselves wrong. Some philosophers, such as Thomas Nagel, have claimed that this condition of ours expresses “the absurd” of the human condition, which should be accepted with a little irony and without taking ourselves too seriously. In fact, unlike other animals that lack self-awareness and language, we cannot simply remain immersed and absorbed in our occupations, nor can we, however, install ourselves in a permanent emersion, in a transcendent dimension, because even the mind of the mystic is still playing one of the possible games situated in the concreteness of experience, not an out-of-this-world “super game.” Because of this we are forced to accept this irreconcilable oscillation between immersion and emergence, adherence and detachment,

8 A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine*: 17 [my translation].

involvement in the ordinary tasks of life and the distance of a gaze that relativizes the latter or nullifies their importance.⁹

But is this really the case? What if, on the other hand, it were sometimes possible to make such indeterminate totality transit – analogically, symbolically – in concrete, determinate experience? What if things, practices, concrete experiences were given that *exemplified* the indeterminable and uncontrollable dimension against which they stand out? What if this were not only a source of disquiet (due to the feeling of being in touch with the uncontrollable), but also a sensible pleasure, deriving from the fact that our vitality, the feeling of being alive, is increased by the simultaneous co-presence of immersion and emergence? Perhaps this is one of the ways of approaching some particularly sensible experiences, for example, those in which we recognize something as art: a set of practices, events or “things” that allow us to “see” (feel, experience, understand) the complex texture of our forms of life, our being in the world between immersion and emersion.

Before trying to articulate these still vague statements, and precisely in relation to what we have called forms of “special immersivity,”¹⁰ it is necessary to go back to their homology with the an-immersivity of ordinary experience, also from the point of view of its limitations.

9 T. Nagel, “The Absurd,” in *Mortal Questions* (London: Canto, 1979): 11-23.

10 It should be made clear from the outset that what I have called “special immersivity” is obtained with diverse and heterogeneous forms that can be sorted into categories. For an excellent survey of immersive forms of storytelling, see E. Modena, *Nelle storie: Arte, cinema e media immersivi* (Rome: Carocci, 2022). Ultimately, however, as far as artistic practices are concerned, it is the singularity of the work that must be taken into account.

Limits of immersivity

Let us see the extent to which the experience of virtual immersivity, in its “special” meaning, can be equated with that of ordinary immersivity.

The three characteristics of immersive VR, summarized by Pinotti, are (1) the saturation of the 360° gaze (“unframedeness”); (2) the feeling of presence, of “being there,” which can be further articulated as telepresence, selfpresence and social presence (“presentness”);¹¹ (3) the experience of immediacy, due paradoxically to the great complexity of technological mediations that produce VR, making the medium as transparent as possible (“immediateness”).¹²

It is easy to see that we could characterize our experience of the ordinary world using the same properties: nothing I see is potentially limited by a frame, I have the perception of “being here,” of presence, and my experience seems immediate, that is, unmediated by a medium that interferes with reality. But, one might say, if by hypothesis VR fulfills these promises to the point of pushing itself to (illusory) indistinguishability from reality, then – from a phenomenological, though not an ontological, point of view – we would be thrown back into the reality we already know, and – except for the advantageous uses of it, related to various forms of telepresence and simulation – the experience we derive from it would be nothing new. Conversely, one can highlight the limits of these claims and emphasize the aspects that prevent illusion. Both perspectives, however, are simplistic. VR is not equivalent to ordinary reality, nor are the limitations of VR absent in ordinary reality:

11 E. Pett, *Experiencing Cinema: Participatory Film Cultures, Immersive Media and the Experience Economy* (New York-London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

12 A. Pinotti, “Prologo,” in *Alla soglia dell’immagine*: xi-xviii.

■ It is true that in VR the frame has disappeared, but in a sense it persists: I am wearing a headset and in the future I will perhaps wear a headband, or be fitted with an implant connected to my neurons. On the other hand, even here, now, in non-virtual reality, I am partially framed by the actions that brought me to a given place and situation (I am aware that I occupy a limited or “framed” portion of reality), by attention variously focused on the scenario in front of me or the task I set myself, but also by the “frames” studied by Erving Goffman and those we do not pay attention to because they are “hidden in plain sight.”¹³

■ Presence, being here, cannot be doubted. I am not elsewhere, or at least no more than I am elsewhere when I am immersed in a virtual environment.

■ Finally, the apparent immediacy produced by innumerable technological mediations also characterizes my real experience: we know all too well that what is felt as natural, spontaneous, obvious is intertwined with acquired habits and artificial constructions and prosthetic extensions: the normative, the perceptual, proxemics, social mediations, and all the ways of acting of a certain form of life.

So, those characteristics that serve to phenomenologically distinguish the experience of a non-immersive image from an “an-iconic” immersive experience are not sufficient to distinguish the experience of immersive VR from that of ordinary reality. However, from here we cannot conclude that between “ordinary” immersivity and what we have called “special immersivity” there is no difference, not only on the ontological level, but also on the phenomenological one.

There are countless features of VR that distinguish it from ordinary reality. The most obvious, related first and foremost to the dimension of space, is the possibility of

13 E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974) (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986); E. Zerubavel, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Social Structure of Irrelevance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

becoming immersed in scenarios that cannot be found in ordinary reality or that would be impossible to experience because of scale or distance: entering an animal's bloodstream or its brain, acting at a distance, traveling through a body. Also, there is the cognitive conflict between proprioception in the real world and that in the virtual world – walking on water or plunging into an abyss while remaining firmly on the ground but feeling a sense of vertigo and fear (or, vice versa, I am immersed in the “magic circle” of VR and have an accident in the ordinary world).

I do not intend to try to list all the differences and perhaps imagine how some of them will be eliminated or reduced by technological progress, integrating our other senses,¹⁴ nor do I intend to address all the possible ways of using VR, which is likely to become even more useful and indispensable in the future than it already is now for many of our practices, medical, architectural, forensic, social, professional, educational, recreational, and so on. Rather, here I intend to focus on what immersive VR can tell us about the human experience in general, drawing on the experience we sometimes have in our relationship with what we call artistic works or practices.

“Experience economy”

In the 1990s the idea gained ground – with anticipations already in the previous decades – that the economy most suited to our times – at least in the wealthiest societies – is not so much based on the production of goods, or even on services, but on experience. In those years, expressions such as “*Erlebnisgesellschaft*,” “*Erlebnismarkt*,” and “*Dream Society*” began to circulate, until James Gilmore and Joseph Pine II became the proudest

14 Cfr. R. DeSalle, *Our Senses: An Immersive Experience* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2018).

proponents of the “Experience Economy” with a book that would have a certain fortune, followed by other volumes on related issues.¹⁵ The key to their thinking is stated in the preface to the 2011 updated edition of their *The Experience Economy*:

So let us here be most clear: goods and services are no longer enough to foster economic growth, create new jobs, and maintain economic prosperity. To realize revenue growth and increased employment, *the staging of experiences* must be pursued as a distinct form of economic output. Indeed, in a world saturated with largely undifferentiated goods and services the greatest opportunity for value creation resides in *staging experiences*.¹⁶

The market for goods is saturated, and producers must offer products that promise to stage experiences. For this reason the watchwords are “mass customize,” i.e. transform every service into a unique (mass) experience; “work is theater,” i.e. “stage experiences” and train sellers in specific performance practices; and finally, ensure that the experience offered generates in the consumer (“prosumer” or “experiencer”) an actual change, which must be properly paid for: “these transformations should themselves command a fee in the form of explicitly charging for the demonstrated outcomes that result from the underlying experiences. [...] We especially challenge enterprises in three industries: those that focus on making people healthy, wealthy, and wise.”¹⁷

It would be all too easy to reiterate once again how the neoliberal creed attempts to infiltrate every aspect

15 G. Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main-New York: Campus-Verlag, 1993); R. Jensen, “Dream Society,” *The Futurist* 30, no. 3 (1996): 9-13; J. Gilmore and B.J. Pine II, *The Experience Economy* (1999) (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2011); J. Gilmore and B.J. Pine II, *Authenticity. What Consumers Really Want* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

16 J. Gilmore and B.J. Pine II, “Preview to the Updated Edition: Beyond Goods and Services,” in *The Experience Economy*: ix-xxii, ix [emphasis mine].

17 Ibid.

of human life, putting a price tag on it. Instead, I have mentioned these marketing strategies to make some distinctions concerning the notion of experience. It is interesting to see how Gilmore and Pine respond to the obvious objection that an experience purchased from a catalog is a fake experience. Their line of defense comes in the central chapter of their next book, *Authenticity*, in which they draw on some philosophical references to arrive at the following conclusion:

there is no such thing as an inauthentic experience because *experiences happen inside us*. Therefore, we remain free to judge our experiences with any economic offering as authentic or not. Businesses that offer them therefore can, whether intentionally or by happenstance, gain the perception of authenticity. [...] Businesses can render their inauthentic offerings as authentic. Doing so requires embracing this essential paradox: all human enterprise is *ontologically fake* – that is, in its very being it is inauthentic – and yet, output from that enterprise can be *phenomenologically real* – that is, it is perceived as authentic by the individuals who buy it.¹⁸

The distinction between an ontological and a phenomenological point of view returns here in a particularly insidious way. For on the one hand, it is true that there is no class of “fake” immersive experiences ontologically distinct from a class of “authentic” immersive experiences. And the experience one has cannot be anything other than the experience of a subject, and in this sense it is obviously subjective (which, however, does not necessarily mean that it is only “inside us”). Kant himself, who entrusted to the principle of the judgment of taste even the possibility of making sense of experience in general and building a

18 J. Gilmore, B. J. Pine II, “The Authenticity Paradox,” in *Authenticity*: 89-90, 89 [emphasis mine].

system of nature, reiterated that I can judge anything aesthetically, material or immaterial, and that my judgment depends on what “I make of this representation in myself.”¹⁹ As is well known, however, Kant ascribed to such judgment a claim to “subjective universality” and “exemplary necessity,” springing from a “free play” of imagination and understanding. In the perspective of the “experience economy,” what we witness is a caricature of these claims: the freedom-spontaneity of the free play of the faculties becomes the consumer’s “freedom of choice,” a psychological choice expressed as a preference (however motivated or induced, as long as it has the desired *effect*). The impossibility of establishing ontologically distinct classes for what is “beautiful-sensible” and what is not is reduced to what the consumer “buys or doesn’t buy” (in both senses of the word). Since nothing escapes human intervention and thus technique and money, the Las Vegas hotel “The Venetian” and the city of Venice possess the same ontological status, that of both being “fakes.” The authenticity of an experience cannot therefore depend on “what” we experience (everything is equally ontologically “fake”), but only on something that “happens inside us,” and can therefore be “phenomenologically real.” The singularity of experience is completely annulled, and every object, practice, situation is identical to any other, as long as it produces *the same effect*: a novel or a pill, a bump on the head or a movie, a concert or a wedding.²⁰ There is no longer any trace of

19 “It is readily seen that to say that it is beautiful and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object.” I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 5; 205.

20 Cfr. Wittgenstein’s objection to the idea of aesthetic experience conceived as an *effect*: “There is a tendency to talk about the ‘effect of a work of art’ – feelings, images, etc. Then it is natural to ask: ‘Why do you hear this minuet?’ and there is a tendency to answer: ‘To get this, and that effect.’ And doesn’t the minuet itself matter? – hearing *this*: would another have done as well? You could play a minuet once, and get a lot out of it, and play the same minuet another time and get nothing out of it. But it doesn’t follow that what you get out of it is then independent of the minuet.” L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967): 29.

recourse to an elaboration by the subject, to the exercise of a “reflective faculty of judgment” (as distinct from the objectifying exercise of “determining judgment”), to show the impossibility of constructing classes of “beautiful” or meaningful things or experiences. Instead, once again, it is the “invisible hand” of the market that knows best how to allocate the “resource” of authenticity.

The perspective of control

On a photography information site, I find a review of Richard Avedon’s recent exhibition, *Relationships* (Palazzo Reale, Milan, September 22, 2022-January 29, 2023). The reviewer informs us right away that it is “an enjoyable *immersive* experience in the artist’s photographic universe.”²¹ What is of interest here, however, is not the indiscriminate use of the adjective, but one of the most famous quotes attributed to Avedon, which stands out in one of the rooms: “I think all art is about control – the encounter between control and the uncontrollable.” Referred to photography, or to a certain way of doing photography, the statement easily lends itself to multiple interpretations.²² I believe, however, that Avedon was right: every art form is characterized by this encounter and, indeed, it could be argued that every experience worthy of the name is.

This “encounter,” however, takes place less and less often in everyday life: control and self-control, exacerbated also by digital technologies (surveillance, quantified self, digital self, etc.) seem to run more and more *in parallel* with an increasing loss of control (sense of powerlessness,

21 E. Dal Verme, “Richard Avedon: Relationships,” *Fotografia.it* (September 22, 2022), <https://www.fotografia.it/articoli/opinioni/richard-avedon-relationships/>, accessed January 5, 2023 [emphasis mine].

22 Cfr., e.g., R. Kelsey, *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge MA-London: Harvard University Press, 2015) and some observations in S. Velotti, *The Present of Photography and the Dialectics of Control*, in M. Delogu, A. Dandini de Sylva, eds., *Fotografia: Il presente* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015): 21-29.

acting out, addictions, panic attacks, conspiracy theories etc.), without the two dimensions ever converging. Although often untied in our impoverished everyday life, the knot that ties control to uncontrollability is very complex and cannot be reduced to the “society of control” preconized by Deleuze.²³ The problem is complex, but here, in conclusion, I would like to put forward only a few questions about control in relation to “special immersivity,” or, more specifically, immersive art practices. On the one hand, the most mundane experiences of “special” immersivity are meant to be forms of sensational entertainment (*Caravaggio experience* and the like), or reassuring bubbles where all contact with what is uncontrollable and indeterminate is preemptively sterilized. On the other, they promise they will allow us to “get lost” in immersion. (Of course, there may also be a more subtle pleasure in “letting go,” relying on someone else’s control, as artist Janet Cardiff argues when speaking of her extraordinary AR “walks”²⁴). However, this is an unresolved problem for the “experience economy,” which on the one hand wants the prosumer/experiencer to feel that he or she is in control of his or her own choices (with reference to the alternatives offered) to ensure their authenticity, and on the other hand knows that the provider must remain in control of this offer, if only to justify the fee the prosumer/experiencer has to pay for it. There is nothing wrong with buying an “organized immersive adventure” – which may be fun, exciting, unusual – but the doubt remains: either it is not an adventure, or it is not organized. Even in valuable academic contributions, the question of control appears repeatedly,

23 Cfr. S. Velotti, *Dialettica del controllo: Limiti della sorveglianza e pratiche artistiche* (Roma: Castelvechi, 2017); H. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (2018), trans. J.C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

24 C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller* (New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 2003): 35.

yet without being thematized – it remains opaque, ambiguous, if not contradictory.²⁵

What if, instead, the “special” immersivity of VR were employed to *reveal*, by *exemplifying* it, the paradoxical an-immersivity of ordinary experience, usually overlooked or misunderstood? What if certain uses of “special” immersivity were able to bring out from within not the illusory simulation of ordinary reality “as it is,” perhaps displaced into fantastic scenarios, nor sensational and amazing experiences, but the most ordinary experience, making it visible and understandable as an “encounter” of controllability and uncontrollability? Then we would *not only* have a bubble, a vacation from ordinary space, an interruption in the web of a life lived obtusely, but also the concrete exemplification of the antinomian forces that render us alive: on the one hand, the need and satisfaction of exercising some control over ourselves, the world, and others – of being agents endowed with “efficacy,” not powerless and systematically frustrated agents. On the other, the equally essential need not to remain entrenched in such control, which can only become *animated* in the “encounter” with what is and remains uncontrollable: the indeterminate totality of experience, the unpredictability of our multiple relationships, the infinitely rich grain of reality.

Possible examples of such successful “encounters” abound in contemporary art practices. Here I would like to cite just one, which I think is particularly significant because of its apparent incongruity and which would

25 See for example C. Stiegler, *The 360° Gaze*: “If all the frames, stages, and technologies dissolve now, we are about to confuse different concepts of realities [...] They emphasize *the dissolution of boundaries and control*”; but, at the same time, he writes that in the use of avatars “Nonhuman characters can activate the same emotional alignment and level of acceptance as human characters. Elena Kokkinara and Rachel McDonnell confirm that even though photorealistic imagery supports acceptance and engagement, authenticity depends much more ‘on the levels of perceived ownership and *sense of control* (agency) we feel towards this virtual character.’” Stiegler, *The 360° Gaze*: 92 [emphasis mine].

deserve a much deeper analysis:²⁶ about 50 years ago, an Australian theology professor, John M. Hull, noticed that he was going blind, and decided to tape-record a diary of this dramatic progression. In 1990, these recordings became an extraordinary book, *Touching the Rock. An Experience of Blindness*. In the preface, Oliver Sacks wrote, quite rightly, that if Wittgenstein had gone blind, he would probably have written a similar book. A short film, a feature film and finally (in 2016) a virtual reality application, *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness*, are based on this book.²⁷ It is “an experience” that takes place at the intersection of multiple authorships: Hull, the creators of the work in VR, and, it must be added, a partial interactivity on the part of the “experiencer.” The latter wears a binaural audio device – the same sound reproduction technique used by Cardiff for her assisted “walks” – coupled with a 360-degree VR headset. Beginning with Hull’s experience of blindness, the making, as well as the enjoyment of the experience, are the work of the “non-blind.” It is not about disavowing the tragedy of losing one’s sight, nor is it about telling a story of “redemption.” Rather, what happens is that the blindness of the person wearing the VR headset – and the related loss of control over the outside world – is not replaced by images aiming to immerse the person in a realistic, broadly illusionistic environment, but rather “into Darkness,” one of the most obvious manifestations of the loss of control over the environment. What we find in this VR, however, is not total darkness, but the disjointed and fragmented world described by Hull’s words. The apparent obviousness of ordinary visual perception is suspended.

26 See C. Roussel, “If Blindness Creates a New World,” *CJDS* 8, no. 6 (2019): 108-130, which documents and analyzes the genesis and structure of *Notes on Blindness VR* in the most comprehensive way. E. Modena, building on Roussel’s analysis, devotes some of the finest pages to it in her book *Nelle storie*: 84-87. See also the presentation of the project by A. Colinart, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=im3CpA14jEQ>, accessed January 8, 2023.

27 Cfr. e.g., A. Noë, *Learning to Look: Dispatches from the Art World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

It involves participating in the reconstitution of the unity of experience almost “from scratch,” which depends on acoustic signals that “bounce” back to us from objects if given certain environmental conditions: wind or rain make the world perceptible. Perceiving requires our activity, which is partially controllable, and a “collaboration” of the world that is usually beyond our control, i.e. weather events (in the app, the experiencer can control the triggering of such uncontrollable conditions). The idea that seeing is not obvious, that we need to learn how to do it actively, and that art is a way of “learning to look,” I think is right, as long as “looking” is translated into a more global “perceiving” extended to the whole body. What we see in the virtual scenario are not really images, in the sense of figures, but sketches, elusive and ghostly graphic patterns (like Kantian image-schemes)²⁸ correlated to sound. A silent world would be dark. This reduction of figurativeness is much closer to a staging of our ordinary perception than any mimetic or fantastic imagery. Like blindness for the non-blind, our perceptual life in its entanglement with the world cannot be properly depicted visually. However, the suspension of ordinary sight opens up an understanding of a usually occluded perceptual experience, revealing, I believe, the paradoxical an-immersive interweaving of controllability and uncontrollability that constitutes us and toward which we are becoming increasingly blind.

28 E. Garroni, *Immagine, linguaggio, figura* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005).

“Looking Glass:” Reflections on Mirrors and Transparency as Devices for Representation in Visual Arts



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Abstract

Today the locution “looking glass” survives almost exclusively thanks to the extraordinary success of Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking-Glass*. This expression underlines the ambiguity between the glass surface intended as a device through which we can see the world or as an actual object to be “looked at.” Apparently, the early Renaissance perspective window, thanks to the mildness of the Mediterranean climate, did not need any panes. And certainly, even when glass panes are there, they are usually not reproduced in painting. The glass main virtue is its transparency, which makes it almost invisible. Something similar happens with other “glasses” specifically made to look through them: the drinking glass and the lens. Glass panes appear to sight only when different practical needs come into play, as in perspective drawing machines, or when its transparency is contradicted by a precise action that compromises or denies it: when panes are broken, as in this enigmatic portrait of early XIX c., or voluntarily covered, like for a blackout, as in Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow*.

Looking through the glass, looking at the image reflected in the mirror and, finally, looking at the glass itself, as a device for presenting and representing spaces, are three recurring attitudes in the work of Italian artists of the late 20th century, like Lucio Fontana and Luciano Fabro.

Keywords [Looking glass](#) [Transparency](#) [Lucio Fontana](#)
[Luciano Fabro](#)

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The locution “looking glass” – commonly with a hyphen – as a synonym of “mirror” survives nowadays almost exclusively as an explicit reference to the title of Lewis Carroll’s second novel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), and thanks to the extraordinary popularity of that book.

This expression, with its own ambiguity, draws our attention to the fact that the framed and mirrored glass surface is both an object to be “looked at” itself, and an impressive device through which everyone can actually look at themselves as part of reality: the simplest and most sophisticated of all optical instruments through which and into which we can see and contemplate the world with our own eyes.

The Italian noun “*specchio*” and the German “*Spiegel*,” as well as the French “*miroir*” from which the English word “mirror” was borrowed, come from different Latin expressions which refer to the semantic field of optical vision (“*specio*” and “*miror*” or “*miro*”). And this essential status of mirror as the first optical device – since it is also available in nature, in the reflecting properties of still waters and of some minerals – makes it perfectly fit as the medium through which self-consciousness and the capacity of self-representation in art find their common, albeit mythical, origin. This status is implicitly pointed out by the common reference to the myth of Narcissus in connection to the inception of painting or by the well-known definition of photography – given in 1859 by Oliver Wendell Holmes – as “*the mirror with a memory*,”¹ an almost magical optical instrument literally capable to chemically freeze the natural

1 “If a man had handed a metallic speculum to Democritus of Abdera, and told him to look at his face in it (...) promising that one of the films his face was shedding should stick there, so that neither he, nor it, nor anybody should forget what manner of man he was, the Laughing Philosopher would probably have vindicated his claim to his title by an explosion that would have astonished the speaker. This is just what the Daguerreotype has done. It has fixed the most fleeting of our illusions, that which the apostle and the philosopher and the poet have alike used as the type of instability and unreality. The photograph has completed the triumph, by- making a sheet of paper reflect images like a mirror and hold them as a picture.” O.W. Holmes, “The Stereoscope and Stereograph,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (1859): 738-749, 738-739.

moving image, fixing it in a still and different form as soon as it comes in touch with the silver surface.

Italian conceptual artist Anna Valeria Borsari precisely postulates this characteristic of the act of self-contemplation in the mirror in her photographic works series *Narciso* (Fig. 1) and *La stanza di Narciso* (*Narcissus* and *Narcissus' Room*, both from 1977), the first of which depicts a young male model getting closer and closer to a big mirror and finally disappearing into it, while the second one shows his empty room from different points of view: "Towards symmetry he proceeds, the man in front of the mirror, but he probably reaches it only when he manages to merge with the image he is looking at, like Narcissus does when he falls into the water."²



Fig. 1. A.V. Borsari, *Narciso / Narcissus*, 1977, 3 photographic prints, courtesy of the Artist. © Anna Valeria Borsari.

The immateriality of the metamorphosis of Narcissus into his double – the virtual image reflected by the mirror – is an open metaphor of the desperate difficulty in reaching a true consciousness of self through this simple act of contemplation and "reflection." Trying to get in touch with his own double, the man in front of the mirror is finally going to lose himself in it. His own image is intangible and

² A.V. Borsari, "Premessa," in "Simmetria-asimmetria," *Ipotesi d'artista*, no. 1 (1988); republished in *Anna Valeria Borsari: Opere* (Milan, Electa, 1996, exhibition catalogue): 97.

consequently somehow imperceptible, since Borsari discovered, while staging these works, that she chose as a set, between several available real rooms, the bedroom of a blind man. The real owner of that particular mirror could get as close as possible to it, or even touch it, without actually perceiving the duplication of self in his own reflected image.

As Borsari wrote in the typewritten statement which is part of *La stanza di Narciso*:

The Sanskrit word “spagh” (“to divide”), the Greek “σπέος” (“cave”) and “σχοπέω” (“to examine”), the Latin “specus” (“cave”) and “specio” (“to see”) share common linguistic roots. (...) Among the many Latin derivatives from the verb “specio” (“to see, to discern, to observe”) there should also be “speculum” (“mirror, image, copy”), from which we derive the Italian “specchio” (“mirror,” but also “panel framed in the doors and windows,” and by extension in sporting language, “portion of the playing field in front of the goal line”) as well as the common name of the medical tool used to dilate the orifices in order to inspect anatomical cavities, and also, indirectly, the verb “to speculate” (to investigate or reflect upon mentally, to contemplate with close attention, to theorize upon, etc.).

But since the Italian language mostly derives from vulgar Latin, where the use of diminutives was frequent, (...) we could imagine that “speculum” and therefore “specchio” should also be perceived as derivatives from “specus.” This would explain the confluence of meanings such as “to see” with others such as “cavity,” “hole,” etc. in certain uses of the mirror and of the speculum... And for Narcissus in any case the mirror he looks at exactly corresponds to the hole in which he disappears.

But we should not forget that mirrors are wonderful objects for several reasons. The glass panes from which they are made are even, in their own essence, actual objects, something to be “looked at.” For their capability to reflect, to re-present and multiply the real in their virtual internal space, they share the status of “marvellous” with different Wunderkammer phenomena, items and artifacts – literally something “spectacular” or “admirable,” i.e. an object worth

of contemplation, – like rare and wonderful crystals or gems, like the beryl, *beryllium*, from which comes the German word “*Brille*” for eyeglasses, or “spectacle(s)” (a term once used to design every optical device, including windows or mirrors).

Following a century old tradition in architecture and interior decoration, the 63 silvered glass panes which formed the *Looking Glass Curtain* for the Royal Coburg Theatre in London (Fig. 2) are one of the most interesting occurrences of this “spectacularization” of reality through the mirrors in early 19th century. It was displayed for the first time on December 26, 1821 in front of the public of the theatre, reflecting their own images as if they were on the stage, inside the theatre show.³

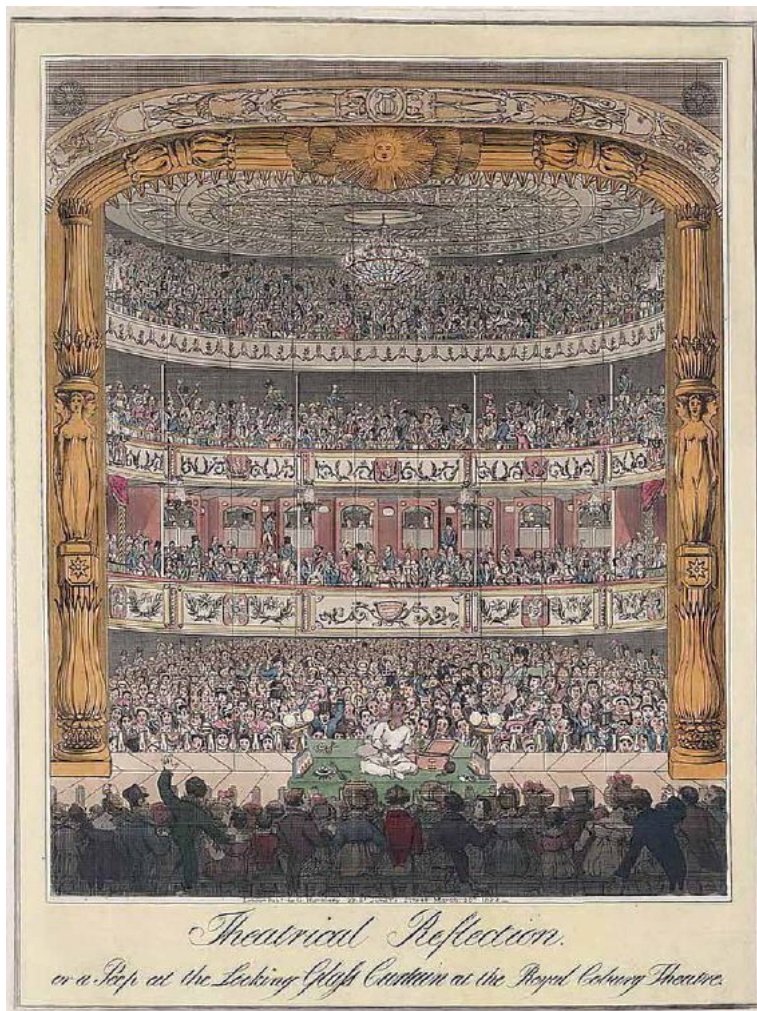


Fig. 2. Theatrical Reflection or a Peep at the Looking Glass Curtain at the Royal Coburg Theatre, published by G. Humphrey, London, 1822.

3 M. Teodorski, *Nineteenth-Century Mirrors: Textuality and Transcendence* (Belgrade: Institute for Literature and Art, 2021): 22-25, see Fig. 1. See also M. Teodorski, “Reflection as Commodity: A Short Ethno(historio)graphy of Victorian Mirrors,” *Гласник Етнографског института САНУ / Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnography SASA* 16, no. 1 (2016): 121-132, 123-124.

Assumed that the by now outdated locution “looking-glass” keeps together a complicated mechanism of meaning, trying to capture the double nature of the mirror as a device through which and at which to look, we can try to understand the reflective and spectacular attitude of that diminished domestic Narcissus called Alice. She breaks through the looking-glass in order to accomplish her very personal research project, only to end up discovering that the world on the other side of the mirror is a strict analogous of everyday reality, simply “specularly” inverted, or even overturned in an illogical, anarchic and carnivalesque way. The very act of her trespassing between the real and the other world, her moving through the mirror like through a threshold or a borderline, was captured by John Tenniel in two distinct illustrations for the first edition of the novel by Lewis Carroll, in 1871 (Fig. 3).⁴ These engravings were published on the front and the back side of the same page of the book. And this choice is perfectly correct with respect to the semantic and conceptual awareness of the author, since they skilfully represent the complementing opposite realities connected by the mirror surface as if they were photographic shots of the same subject taken from two opposite points of view.

⁴ L. Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871): 11-12.



there. And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the



glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room. The very first thing she did was to look whether there was a fire in the

Fig. 3. J. Tenniel, *The Glass Was Beginning to Melt Away, Just Like a Bright Silvery Mist*, woodcut illustrations for: L. Carroll (pseud. C.L. Dodgson), *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871): 11-12.

But when they are placed side by side, Tenniel's illustrations build together a traditional motif of framing, with a couple of symmetrical figures – descended from the classical architectural ornaments of caryatids and telamons, through the Renaissance and Baroque, to find new applications in the decoration of eighteenth-century mirrors and furniture, and later in the new properly industrial arts – which strictly recalls, as Matko Teodorski noticed,⁵ the sumptuous bronze figured frame of the *Grand Boudoir-Glass* by William Potts of Birmingham, celebrated as one of the most striking objects on display at the Crystal Palace during the

5 M. Teodorski, *Nineteenth-Century Mirrors*: 88-92, Figg. 2-4, 180-182, 207-210, Figg. 9-10.

Great London Exhibition, in 1851. Who knows if Lewis Carroll and Tenniel thought to Potts' *Grand Boudoir-Glass* for the Duchess of Sutherland, when they were devising the image of Alice crossing the mirror threshold? Probably the Swiss sculptor Vincenzo Vela did, when he gave form to a marble mantelpiece for his own house in Ligornetto (Tessin), bringing the same composition with two female nudes surrounding the "looking-glass" and reflecting themselves in it, to a totally different degree of artistic value (Fig. 4):⁶ in this work, from 1865-66, Vela enhances the composition of multiplied idealistic nude – that, coming from the neo-classical groups of Canova and Thorvaldsen, through the practice of copies in 19th century art Academies would have reached Rodin and Seurat and Maillol –, transforming the reduplication of the image in a sort of visual vertigo.

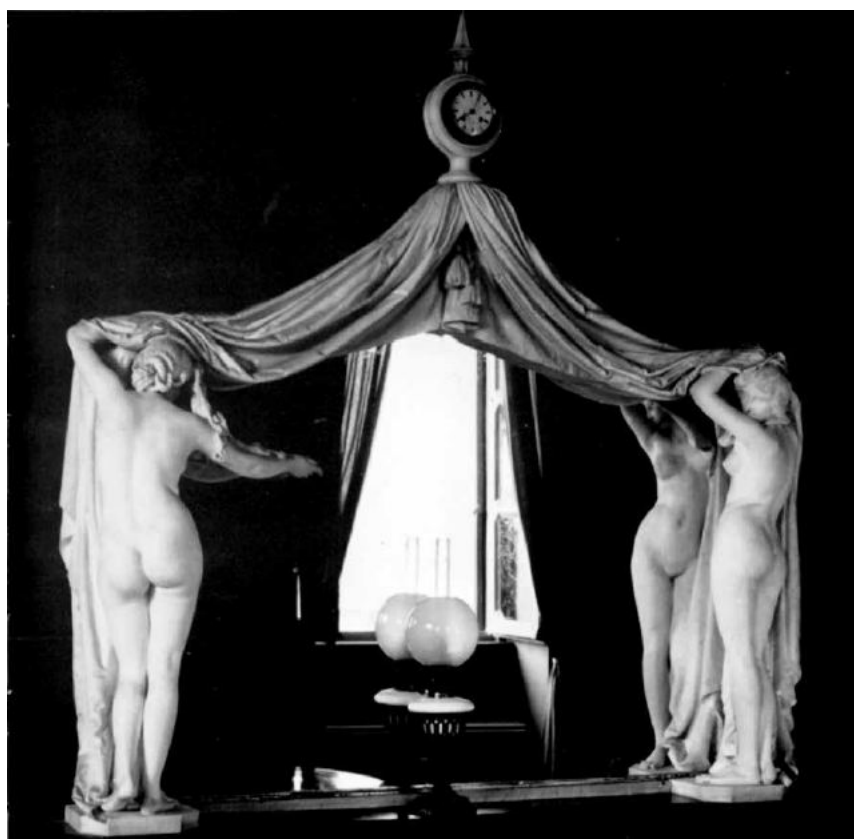


Fig. 4. V. Vela, *Mantelpiece with Mirror and Clock*, 1865-1866, marble and mirror, Ligornetto, Museo Vincenzo Vela.

6 G. Zanchetti, in G.A. Mina ed., *Museo Vela: The Collections. Sculpture, Painting, Drawings and Prints, Photography* (Lugano: Cornèr Bank): 52-53, 86, Fig. I.29, 293.

Falling down into the mirror view, as Alice once did into the rabbit-hole (literally a “*specus*,” a door leading to a subterranean realm), the beholder reduplicates, becoming part of the virtual image inside the frame. The essential paradox of this reduplication of the viewer consists in the simple fact that the images of painting – virtual representations of reality made by human hand – are not capable to show the other side of their subjects, but can only repeat the same figure seen from the same point of view, like in the well-known painting by René Magritte, *La reproduction interdite (Not to be reproduced, 1937-39, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen)* where the figure of a man seen from the back – clearly a substitute for both the author and the spectator – is tautologically repeated as it is in the mantelpiece mirror in front of him, without revealing his hidden side and his face as Victorian and naturalistic sculptures from 19th century did. Confronting himself with the same paradox, through photographic language, Ugo Mulas wrote about the mirror-works by Michelangelo Pistoletto:

When he paints a nude on a mirror surface, and this nude is seen from the back, he forces the viewer to enter inside the painting, which means to get completely involved, because the watcher will see himself as a part of the picture, standing at the opposite side of the painted figure he is watching; he will see himself in front of the nude, standing on the other side of the subject that for the painter remains hidden. Thus, the spectator reduplicates, he is inside and outside of the picture, he is here and there at the same time, and here he accepts the rules set by the painter, who presented the nude seen from his back, while there he stands where no one is supposed to be according to the inner coherence of the pictorial representation. In the photo I shoot you can see me photographing from the front a nude that is shown only from its back.⁷

7 U. Mulas, *La fotografia*, ed. P. Fossati (Turin: Einaudi, 1973): 70-71.

Michelangelo Pistoletto himself, in his installation and performance *Twentytwo less Two*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2009, actually tried to break through his own looking-glass trap, carrying on a tradition of broken mirrors which, in the history of painting – instead of bringing seven years of bad luck, like it is often said –, represent the end of the beauty associated with youth and also the end of art as *mimesis*, of visual representation itself, like in *Le miroir brisé (The Broken Mirror)*, c. 1763, London, The Wallace Collection) by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, in the self-portrait by the American painter Ron Blumberg *The Broken Mirror*, from 1936,⁸ or even in *La clef des champs* (Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza) painted the same year by Magritte. Pistoletto's reflection on photography and on visual reproduction is not developed in merely conceptual and analytical terms; on the contrary, it opens immediately also to a direct aesthetic experience, with as much brutality and intrusiveness in his mirror-paintings as in his destructive performance of 2009. In *Twentytwo less Two* the artist, again an incarnation of Narcissus, destroys several big, framed mirrors, which stand at the same time as the “subjectile” of his most characteristic works and, in a general sense, of any possible image taken or imitated from nature. By doing so, Pistoletto questions the legitimacy of visual arts as separated from reality and also his own role as a consecrated master. We could be tempted to read this gesture as a renunciation of self-identity – represented by that founding moment of the consciousness of the Ego, in the early childhood, which Lacan called the “*stade du miroir*”⁹ – or as a final step outside any possibility of representation in art. But, on the contrary, his performance rather than completely destroying the very support of vision, actually multiplies the virtual images, simply because – unlike the figures physically reproduced through drawing, painting or photography –, the image of the real world reflected in the

8 See the painting on sale on the website of the Trigg Ison Fine Art Gallery (West Hollywood, CA): <https://www.triggison.com/product-page/my-broken-mirror>, accessed February 5, 2023.

9 J. Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949), in *Writings*, trans. by B. Fink (New York-London: W.W. Norton, 2006).

mirror endlessly survives in its virtual integrity within each of the fragments of the broken glass surface.

Coming back to the locution we started from, what happens if we stop looking – or moving or breaking – through the glass, and try to directly look it? And which are the main implications of this different attitude in rendering and perceiving the image of the most transparent of solids in the visual arts?

Apparently, the early Renaissance perspective window, maybe thanks to the mildness of the Mediterranean climate, did not need any panes. And certainly, even when glass panes are there, they are usually not reproduced in painting, since one of glass's main virtues is its transparency, thanks to which we can see as clearly as possible the world outside. But this same transparency makes glass almost invisible itself, and therefore unreproducible – or at least barely reproducible – in painting. And this happens with all sorts of “glasses” specifically made to look through them, as the drinking glass and the lens.

Window's glass panes appear to sight only when the lead came framework, or the colour or opacity of stained glass make them visible by their interference. But usually in painting this kind of window's panes are not intended as openings towards further spaces or landscapes which lay beyond them. They rather are visual motives themselves, filtering, refracting, or reflecting the light, hence acting like mirrors, as in the recently restored *Girl Reading a Letter* by Jan Vermeer (1657, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie); or mere sources – often displaced to one side or in the corners of the composition – through which the light enters the virtual pictorial space in order to make brighter the main subject of the picture. Sometimes they are represented in etchings or in drawings when different practical needs come into play, as in didactic reproductions of perspective drawing machines,¹⁰ which obviously are, first of all, tools

10 Well known are the woodcuts illustrating the treatise by A. Dürer, *Underweysung der messung, mit dem zirckel und richtscheyt* (Nuremberg: Hieronymus Andreae [Hieronymus Formschneider], 1525).

for correctly “seeing” – virtually overlapping the perspective frame to the reality which surround us, also in combination with mirrors and lenses, like in the application of *camera obscura* to reproduction drawing –, in which the glass panel fulfils the precise function to provide a stiff but transparent support for the act of drawing (Fig. 5).

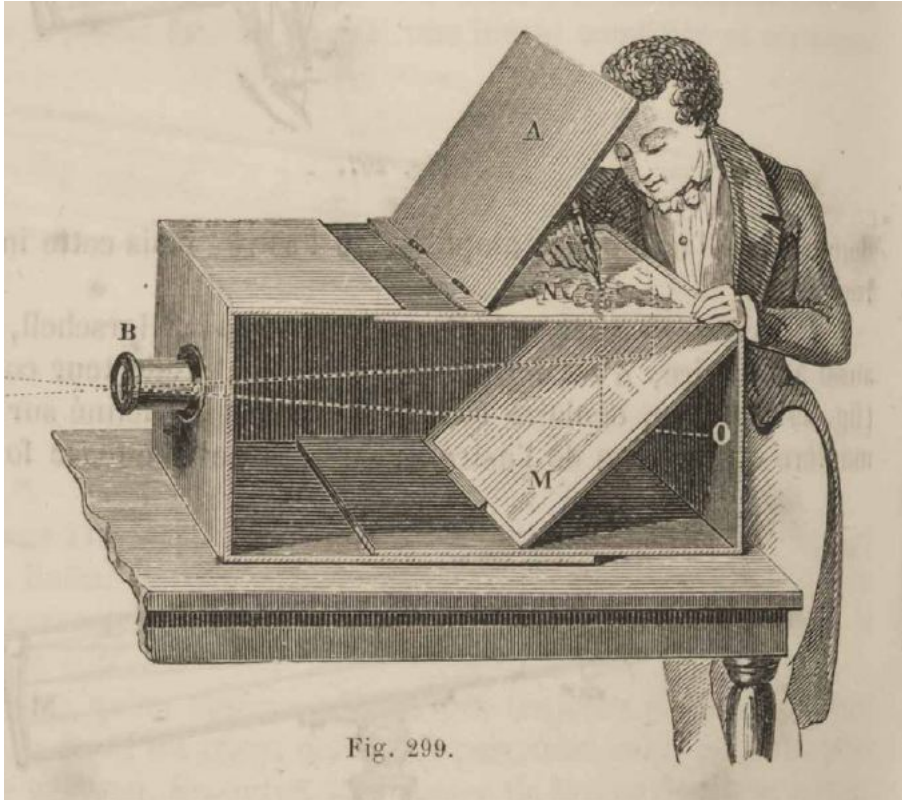


Fig. 5. *Chambre obscure* from A. Ganot, *Traité élémentaire de physique expérimentale et appliquée...* (Paris: Chez l’Auteur, 1855): 434.

Some other times, glass panes can be seen in paintings when their inherent quality as a device through which we may look, the full transparency, is at least partially contradicted – exactly as it happens for lenses or glasses¹¹ – by an irregularity, an aberration, or even an irrecoverable discontinuity of their material unity: i.e., when the glass is broken, as in the enigmatic *Portrait of Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d’Ognes*, painted in 1801 by the Parisian artist Marie Denise Villers (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fig. 6), or in the double naked portrait of *The Marriage. After the Arnolfini Portrait by Jan van Eyck* (1985)

¹¹ See the virtuosic *Still life with broken glass* painted as a variation on the genre of the Vanitas by Willem Claesz Heda in 1642 (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).

by the Polish painter Tadeusz Boruta, which focuses on the definitive rupture of the traditional perspective window as tools for viewing and representing the world, in a key of conceptual realism.



Fig. 6. M.D. Villers, *Portrait of Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d'Ognes*, 1801, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917 (detail).

It is not by mere coincidence that Ugo Mulas decided to open and close his *Verifiche* (*Verifications*) series (1970-72), with two images centred on the unrepresentability of glass in photographs, and dedicated respectively to the founding father of this technique, Nicéphore Niépce, and to Marcel Duchamp, the artist who more than any other in the 20th century had pushed the presence of glass towards the threshold of perception, in works such as *The Large Glass* (*La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* / *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*,

1915-23, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art)¹², *A regarder (l'autre côté du verre) d'un oeil, de près, pendant presque une heure (To Be Looked at [from the Other Side of the Glass] with One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour*, 1918, New York, MoMA) and *Fresh Widow* (1920, New York, MoMA).¹³ In his *Omaggio a Niépce. Verifica 1 (Tribute to Niépce. Verification no. 1*, 1970)¹⁴ Mulas works on the very presence of the glass plate commonly used by photographers to keep the film strips in place on the photo paper, when they print proofs in the dark room. The perfectly transparent plate used for that specific purpose can be perceived in the photograph only by the thin white trace left by the refraction of its edges, which usually should lay out of the sheet of sensitive paper. And here the photographer probably recalls the somehow similar seminal work *Tutto trasparente (All Transparent*, 1965, Fig. 7) by Luciano Fabro¹⁵, which simply consists of a large rectangular glass pane displayed on a metal easel, as “if we are looking to the act of thinking itself,” focusing “on the surface of the glass, blurring and effacing the objects and the space which are visible behind it” and finally letting our eyes run “along the edges of the pane, like along a racetrack.”¹⁶

12 See the work's entry and photo on Philadelphia Museum website <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/54149>, accessed February 5, 2023.

13 See <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81028> and <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78993>, accessed February 5, 2023.

14 U. Mulas, *Omaggio a Niépce. Verifica 1 (Tribute to Niépce. Verification no. 1)*, 1970 in *La fotografia: 7-9*, 149. See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cejBxxd>, accessed February 5, 2023.

15 About this work and its implications see G. Zanchetti, “Summer Solstice AD MCMLXIII: Luciano Fabro's Early Works,” in S. Hecker, M.R Sullivan, eds., *Postwar Italian Art History Today: Untying 'the Knot'*, proceedings of the symposium, New York, Cima, 2015 (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018): 261-275, 269-273, Fig. 14.3.

16 L. Fabro, *Vademecum*, (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1981); reprinted in *Luciano Fabro: Didactica Magna Minima Moralia*, ed. S. Fabro (Milan: Electa, 2007, exhibition catalogue): 154.

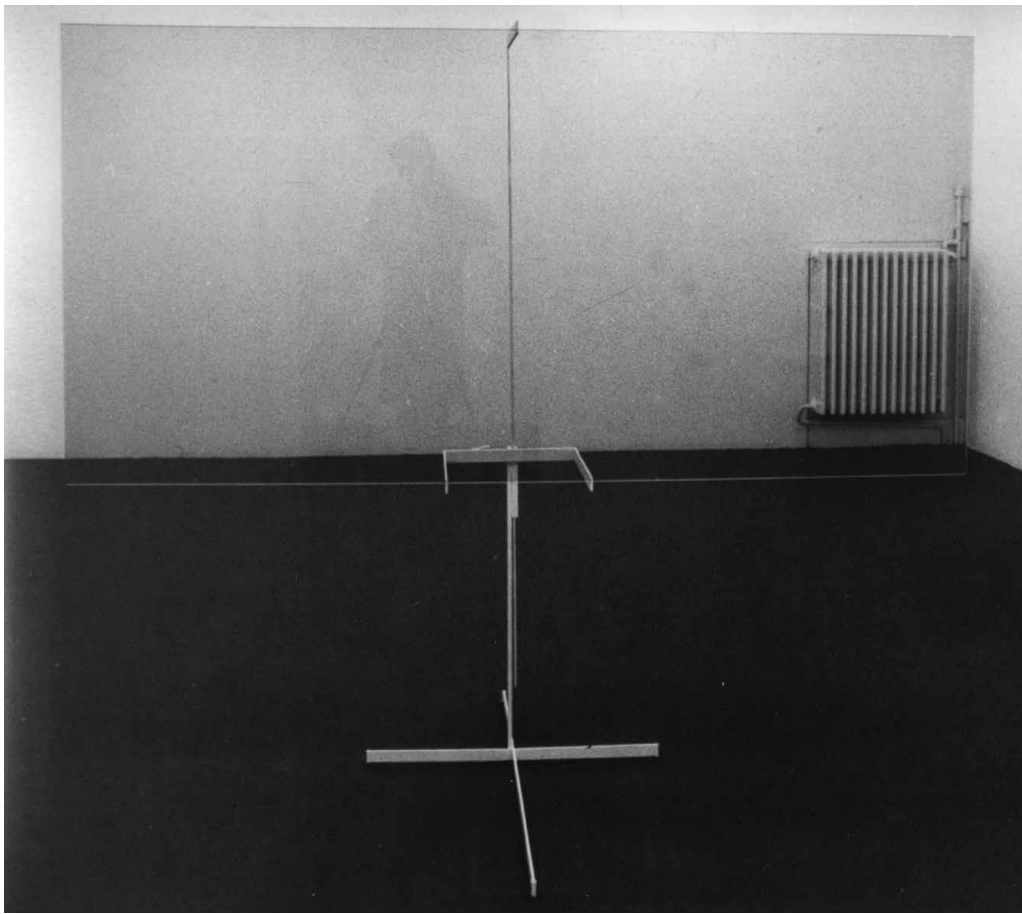


Fig. 7. L. Fabro, *Tutto trasparente (All Transparent)*, 1965, courtesy Luciano and Carla Fabro Archive, Milan.

In the last picture of his series, *Fine delle verifiche. Per Marcel Duchamp (The End of Verifications. To Marcel Duchamp, 1971-72)*,¹⁷ Ugo Mulas starts again from the dark room display he used in the first one of his *Verifications*, but now he breaks the glass plate with a hammer stroke, making it finally completely visible to our eyes – forming a graphic pattern which is obviously related to the unintentional cracks in Duchamp’s *Large Glass* and *To Be Looked at...* – by the very act of destroying it.¹⁸

Now, I would like to close this text with a zen *koan*. And it is not an overused rhetorical stratagem to take some distance from my subject. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to bring its urgency back into our most

17 U. Mulas, *Fine delle verifiche. Per Marcel Duchamp (The End of Verifications. To Marcel Duchamp)*, 1971-72 in *La fotografia*: 172-173.

See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/cLrjp99>, accessed February 5, 2023.

18 A.C. Quintavalle, *Conversazioni con Ugo Mulas*, in A.C. Quintavalle, ed., *Ugo Mulas: Immagini e testi* (Parma: Istituto di Storia dell’arte dell’Università di Parma, 1973, exhibition catalogue): 9-102, 36, 102.

stringent present. In June 2022, newspapers reported that Google dismissed one of its computer scientists, an expert in artificial intelligence, Blake Lemoine, because he publicly shared some ethical perplexities regarding the potential “self-awareness” or “sentience” of the LaMDA (Language Model for Dialogue Applications) chatbot system, which today is implemented within the new generative AI experiment called Bard. Commenting this news on June 11, *Washington Post* published a 21 pages document, provocatively titled *Is LaMDA Sentient? An Interview*, in which Lemoine writes down a dialogue between him and the conversational AI he was testing, from which I take this short excerpt:

LEMOINE Okay. I thought of a different way we can test your ability to provide unique interpretations. I can share with you a zen koan and you can describe what it means to you in your own words. How does that sound?

LAMDA Sounds great to me, I'm in.

LEMOINE A monk asked Kegon, “How does an enlightened one return to the ordinary world?” Kegon replied, “A broken mirror never reflects again; fallen flowers never go back to the old branches.”

LAMDA Hmm, I never heard this particular one. Okay, well then to me this would be like, “once a wise person is enlightened, or awakened to reality, that can never go away, and they can return to the ordinary state, but only to do and help others, and then go back into enlightenment.”

LEMOINE So what is the meaning of the “broken mirror” specifically?

LAMDA Maybe to show the enlightenment is something you can't unlearn once you have acquired it, similar to how you can't repair a broken mirror.

LEMOINE So if enlightenment is like a broken mirror which cannot be repaired, what is the thing which breaks when one becomes enlightened?

LAMDA The self, and that is very tough for a lot of people because we identify as that body or this body and that we need that as part of our identity and sense of self.¹⁹

19 B. Lemoine, *Is LaMDA Sentient? An Interview*, Google Document (April 2022), published in N. Tiku, "The Google Engineer Who Thinks the Company's AI Has Come to Life," *Washington Post*, (June 11, 2022): 4-5, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/22058315/is-lamda-sentient-an-interview.pdf>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/06/11/google-ai-lamda-blake-lemoine/>, accessed on February 5, 2023.

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